

The New Criterion

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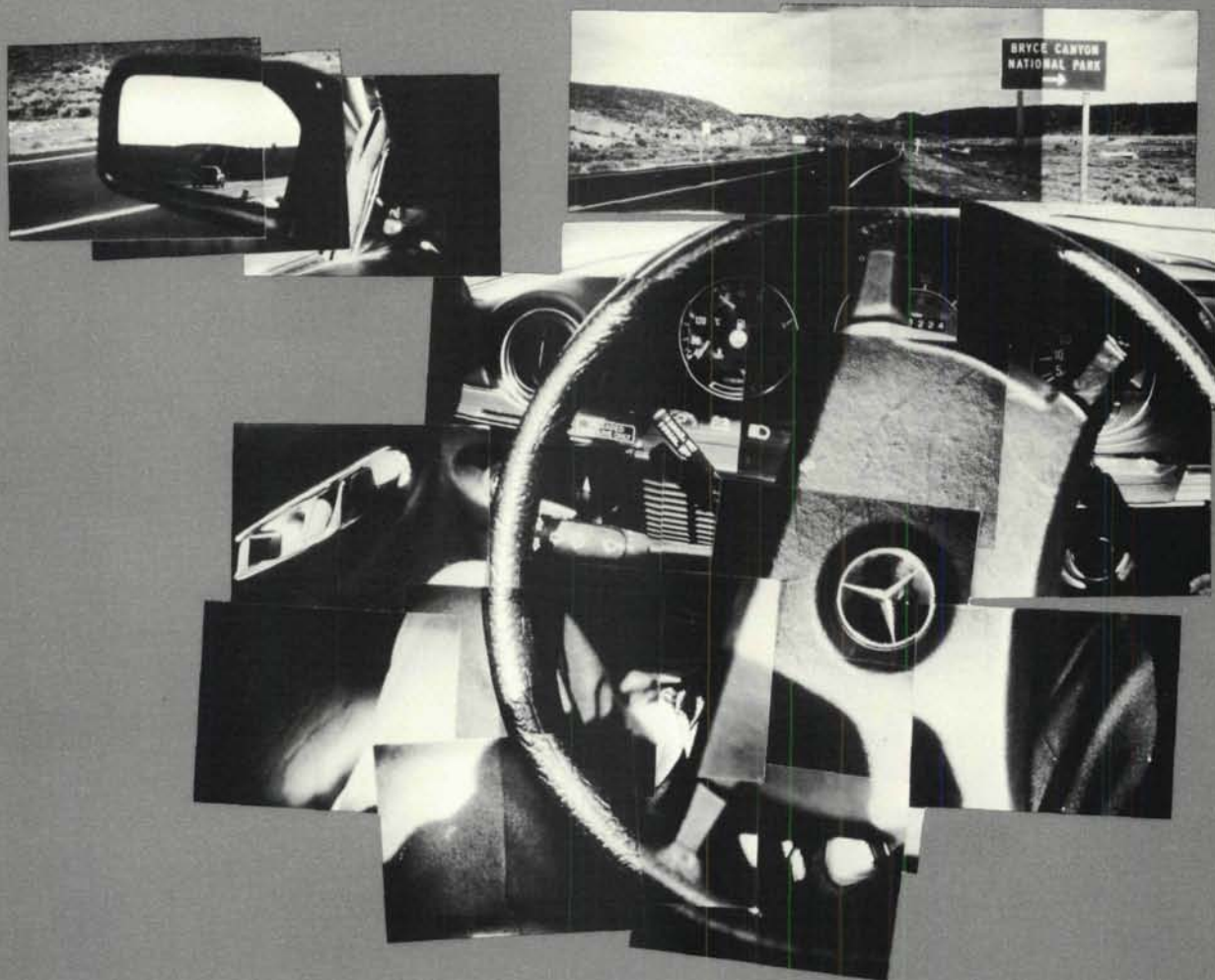
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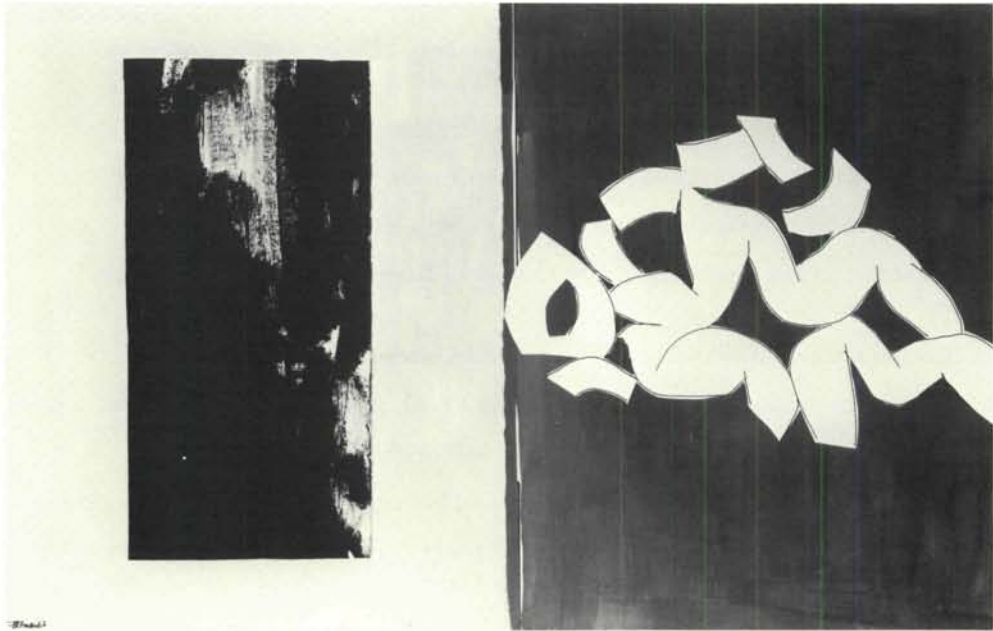
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Lenny on our minds

by Samuel Lipman

Sunday afternoon, November 14, 1943, was fairly quiet, as wartime Sunday afternoons go. The Russians, then our allies, were pressing the Germans back from Zhitomir; American submarines had just sunk several Japanese ships in the South Pacific; Allied Forces, both British and American, were making limited gains on the Italian front.

At home, cultural activities went on much as always. The Sunday crowd of music lovers had assembled in Carnegie Hall for the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra concert, scheduled to be led by the venerable émigré conductor Bruno Walter. But in that age of radio, the concert's impact was no longer restricted to the audience in the hall: across the country the orchestra's immense broadcast public was lined up in front of its sets, awaiting the beginning of what must have been for many an experience comparable to attendance at church.

The concert began (as was the custom in wartime) with the "Star Spangled Banner," smartly played by the Philharmonic and sung by the audience with a vocal accuracy and splendor few trained choruses today could better.¹ Even before the national anthem, the CBS radio listeners found out something the ticket buyers had been told only a few moments earlier: the concert was not after all to be conducted by Bruno Walter, for the beloved maestro had been taken

ill. In his place, appearing without the benefit of a rehearsal, would be the orchestra's Massachusetts-born, Harvard-educated, Serge Koussevitsky and Curtis Institute-trained assistant conductor. The name of this untried twenty-five year old musician was Leonard Bernstein.

Veni, vidi, vici, Lenny: the rest is history. The program he conducted, typical of so many the young genius would do in the years to come, included the *Manfred* Overture by Robert Schumann, *Theme, Variations, and Finale* by the Hungarian Miklós Rózsa (later to make a name in Hollywood for the musical scores to *Quo vadis?* and *Ben-Hur*), and *Don Quixote* by Richard Strauss. At this point the broadcast ended with a reading of war news bulletins, and Bernstein finished the concert in Carnegie Hall with the Prelude to Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*. The performances were brilliant, the audience cheered, and next morning both *The New York Times* and the *Herald Tribune* carried enthusiastic front-page stories. Musically Leonard Bernstein was launched, and so—it must have seemed—were we.

What the *Times* called "a dramatic musical event" was nothing less than the comet-like appearance of a great musical hope, the native-born star performer whose high talent and public acceptance would demonstrate once and for all that greatness on the concert stage need not be imported and European, but could be recognizably, uniquely, and wonderfully American.

1 The entire broadcast is available on a fund-raising album from the New York Philharmonic.

This performing triumph—Bernstein was to conduct the Philharmonic ten more times in the 1943-44 season—was soon followed by an equally great success in composition. On April 18, 1944, just five months after Bernstein's Philharmonic debut, the Metropolitan Opera House witnessed the premiere of *Fancy Free* by the Ballet Theatre (now the American Ballet Theatre). *Fancy Free* was Bernstein's first collaboration with the dancer Jerome Robbins, whose choreography greatly assisted him in telling the exuberant story of three sailors at liberty on a twenty-four hour spree in New York. Bernstein's music mixed jazz and "serious" elements in a brash and immediately compelling manner. The public and the critics swooned. Everything finally had come together: in Leonard Bernstein American music now had its Columbus and its Barnum all rolled into one.

Today, forty-one years later, the sixty-seven-year-old erstwhile prodigy is still in the news and on our minds. The great public occasion this time is a plush, operatic performance of Bernstein's 1957 Broadway hit *West Side Story*, immortalized in the composer's own conducting not just on black vinyl, audio cassettes, and compact disks,² but also in a May 17 PBS Great Performances documentary devoted in large part to the musical's recording sessions and in toto, as always, to Lenny. And on July 4 he will again sound a symbolically American note when he conducts the National Symphony of Washington in a concert of his own music and that of John Philip Sousa. The concert will be televised across the country from the West Lawn of the Capitol.

The years between the start of the Bernstein career and his present status as America's most famous homegrown classical music figure have been filled with a bewildering profusion of activities, some of them serious and most of them in some way successful. To describe Bernstein's musical life over what is now approaching a half century is to

provide a chronicle not just of his triumphs but also of the hopes and failures of American music itself.

Leonard Bernstein, the callow American youth whose career as a conductor had begun in Carnegie Hall as a last-minute replacement for a famous European sage, went on to become, from 1958 to 1969, the most popular, though perhaps not the most respected, music director of the Philharmonic since Arturo Toscanini. Bernstein's exciting performances, in a repertory notable for its easy combination of classical masterpieces, certified crowd-pleasers, and little-known but major American works, galvanized audiences despite the opposition of purists discomfited by his wild gyrations on the podium and evident lack of interest in perfect orchestral ensemble. The box office told the story: in contrast to the easy availability of tickets under his immediate predecessors (and his successors), when Bernstein was the orchestra's leader there was talk of a waiting list for subscriptions, and single admissions were just about impossible to come by. Similarly, in contrast to the current absence of an exclusive recording contract for the Philharmonic, Bernstein's numerous CBS recordings with the orchestra sold like the proverbial hotcakes (and still sell well today), bringing in substantial royalty checks vital not just to the financial health of the orchestra but even more to the pocketbooks and the morale of the players.

This glamorous career as leader of one of America's establishment orchestras, publicized and remunerative as it certainly was, hardly constitutes Bernstein's only claim to musical fame. He spent the fifteen or so years between his conducting debut and his accession to the Philharmonic post learning his craft with the Boston Symphony as Koussevitsky's hoped-for successor, with the New York City Orchestra as its director from 1945 to 1948, and through numerous guest appearances the world over. Even more sensationally, he made a stunning career on Broadway as a composer of musicals, three of them long-running hits, and one

2 Deutsche Grammophon 415 253-1 (LP); 415 253-4 (cassette); 415 253-2 (CD).

other—*Candide* (1956)—perhaps the most discussed and highly praised “miss” in the history of the American musical theater.

Bernstein’s Broadway hits had begun only thirteen months after he substituted for Walter, and just eight months after the first performance of *Fancy Free*. *On the Town*, which opened at the Adelphi Theater in New York December 28, 1944, was a dramatic adaptation and expansion of *Fancy Free*. It kept Robbins’s dances and Bernstein’s music, and added brassy lyrics (and stage performances) by the composer’s long-time friends and associates Betty Comden and Adolph Green. The result was captivating, and *On the Town* ran for 463 performances on Broadway. MGM bought the movie rights for more than \$100,000, and made the film a starring vehicle for Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra. In a curious throw of the movie-making dice, only four of Bernstein’s original musical numbers (including, at least, the still classic “New York, New York”) were used; to fill out the movie, producer Arthur Freed commissioned an altogether humdrum score by the now forgotten Hollywood composer Roger Edens.

Broadway lightning struck for Bernstein a second time in 1953, when *Wonderful Town*, an adaptation (starring Rosalind Russell) of Ruth McKenney’s famous *New Yorker* magazine series “My Sister Eileen,” began a run of more than 500 performances. Just three years later, in 1956, Bernstein suffered a failure which paradoxically only heightened his reputation as a creative force in American show music. *Candide*, written to a book by Lillian Hellman and lyrics by John Latouche, Richard Wilbur, and Dorothy Parker, ran for a mere 73 performances. But Bernstein’s score emerged triumphant from all the clumsiness onstage, and revivals of the work (in altered dramatic form), were hits on Broadway in 1973 and at the New York City Opera in 1982.

Bernstein’s greatest Broadway triumph was the 1957 musical *West Side Story*. This setting of the stock Romeo and Juliet situation of young lovers fated to suffer because

of the incompatibility of their social origins was first conceived by Bernstein (and Robbins) as arising out of urban tensions between Jews and Catholics; with a certain prescience, in its final form the work dramatized the conflict between rival “American” and Puerto Rican street gangs. The show, with lyrics by the then youthful Stephen Sondheim, contained the hit songs “Maria” and “Tonight,” and dances again choreographed by Robbins. It ran 981 times on Broadway, and a remarkable 1,040 times in London. As a movie it won an Oscar as Best Picture of 1961. Despite the music’s tendency (less evident on the vibrant original cast recording³ than on the composer’s new, electronically gilded version) to substitute sentimentality for sentiment, one hardly had to be a Pangloss at the time to view Bernstein, still under fifty, as the heir to Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, and Richard Rodgers—and perhaps even to George Gershwin.

Bernstein’s success on Broadway was now so great it was easy to forget that many of his artistic roots lay not in commercial music but in large-scale “classical” music meant for performance in the concert hall. He had completed the *Jeremiah* Symphony, still one of his most impressive efforts, as early as 1942; based on Hebraic cantillation but nonetheless recognizably American in its jazzy timbre and rhythms, *Jeremiah* seemed to amalgamate the composer’s proud Jewish heritage with his equally proud American artistic consciousness.

Bernstein’s next symphony, subtitled (after W. H. Auden’s poem) *The Age of Anxiety*, appeared seven years later. Though admirably written for the orchestra and the solo piano (and brilliantly played in performance and on two recordings by Bernstein’s longtime friend, Lukas Foss), this work, like the even more rhetorical and trendy 1961-63 Symphony No. 3 (*Kaddish*, dedicated “To the Beloved Memory of John F. Kennedy”) seems today vastly less authentic and straightforward than *Jeremiah*, a composition written before the appurtenances of

3 CBS S32603.

success and the ensuing self-indulgence had become a part of the composer's modus operandi.

No account of Bernstein's achievements in the first three decades or so of his career would be complete without an account of his activities as a pianist, most often playing the works of others. A student at Curtis of the great Russian taskmistress Isabelle Vengerova, Bernstein was long able to integrate a strict technical training with his own in-born digital facility and exciting rhythmic sense. The result has been scintillating performances of works as different as the Beethoven C major and the Ravel G major concertos. A still more remarkable example of Bernstein's playing, because it is of material which rarely engages the attention of the greatest pianists of the day, is a 1947 recording of his friend and mentor Aaron Copland's Piano Sonata (1941). Now re-issued by New World Records,⁴ it provides a much needed object lesson in how apparently dry and "intellectual" music can be ennobled through commanding and dedicated performance.

A word too must be spared for Bernstein's impressive facility as an accompanist of singers in both serious and what can only be called "patter" material. His collaborations with his great friend mezzo-soprano Jennie Tourel in French and Russian songs have now become mythical. His playing of popular cabaret material is equally stunning; that this particular accomplishment was his at a young age can be heard today in private recordings⁵ made in 1939 with Judy Holliday (then still Judith Tuvim) and Comden and Green.

While Bernstein is often seen as a musical triple threat—he was called "Triple-Note Man of the Music World" in a psychologically perceptive 1945 *New York Times Magazine* article by Mark Schubart—he actually has four strings to his artistic bow: conducting, composing, playing the piano, and teaching.

⁴ NW 277.

⁵ JJA 197648.

Bernstein did some conventional teaching in the late 1940s under Koussevitsky at Tanglewood, and in the 1950s at Brandeis University. But his great services to music education have not been rendered in the studio or in the classroom. His gift in teaching, as in performance, has been for warm, humanly persuasive communication via the electronic media, and in particular, on television. In the 1950s on the Ford Foundation-CBS (later ABC) series "Omnibus," and in the 1960s on the New York Philharmonic-CBS Young People's Concerts, Bernstein was the force for music appreciation that Walter Damrosch and Ernest Schelling had been a generation earlier. To remark this is not to damn with faint praise: Damrosch on the radio and Schelling in live concerts were central in training the musically literate audience of a bygone and simpler era. Bernstein, for his part, through his broadcasts and their publication in *The Joy of Music* (1959) and *The Infinite Variety of Music* (1966), has been responsible for the last intellectually sophisticated and successful attempt made to interest and educate today's vast public in the great masterpieces of the Western musical tradition.

The lives of some great musicians—Bach's is a case in point—appear almost seamless; for them creation is a continuous outpouring, a straight-line development of their genius. In the lives of others, there are great watersheds. For Beethoven the turning point was the onset of deafness, directing his musical thoughts from the public display of the virtuoso to the tortured self-examination of the lonely creator. For Wagner, it was the revolution of 1848, when he decided that only in a radically new world could he achieve his operatic goals. Though surely lacking Beethoven's and Wagner's terrifying singlemindedness of artistic purpose, Leonard Bernstein too has been dramatically affected by extra-musical pressures: the late 1960s, those difficult years for creators over-sensitive to the social turmoil around them, seem to have changed the manner in which he does his art and engages his public.

When Bernstein announced in November of 1966 that he would leave as Music Director of the Philharmonic upon the expiration of his contract in 1969, the *Times*, as it had done upon his debut, ran a front-page story with the news. Bernstein's own words, important enough to be quoted once more in Howard Shanet's standard 1975 history of the orchestra, made his reason for leaving clear enough: "A time is arriving in my life," he said, "when I must concentrate maximally on composing, and this cannot be done while retaining the great responsibilities inherent in the Philharmonic post, which is a full-time commitment, and indeed, more than that."

Alas, matters hardly seem to have worked out the way Bernstein planned. To adapt Dean Acheson's trenchant words about England having lost an empire and not yet found a role, when he left the Philharmonic Bernstein gave up a great orchestra without seeming to be able to compose very much in the bargain. The real change in Bernstein's new life has not been from conductor to composer, but from resident conductor in New York to guest conductor the world over.

In New York, Bernstein is now a kind of permanent visitor with the Philharmonic, holding the newly created title of Laureate Conductor. Though he has not appeared with the orchestra every year—this past season, for example, he did not conduct the Philharmonic at all—his appearances with the orchestra have been frequent enough to demonstrate conclusively that he still retains his standing with the New York musical public. But the Philharmonic audience now sees only a limited side of their hero's musical personality. When he has appeared with the orchestra in recent years, he has tended—as the Canadian critic and broadcaster Paul Robinson pointed out in a 1982 study of Bernstein as conductor⁶—to favor contemporary music; in Paris, by contrast, where he has conducted often in recent years, he has emphasized French music.

6 *Bernstein*, Vanguard Press, 1982.

If Bernstein as a conductor has a spot where he feels at home today, it is neither New York nor Paris, but rather Austria. Paul Robinson put the case well for what many see as the conductor's present apotheosis: "... from the early 1970s on, Bernstein began to inherit the mantle of Furtwängler and Bruno Walter, conductors who had had long associations with the Vienna Philharmonic. Bernstein was no longer an American phenomenon; he was now a great conductor in the European mainstream." In concert and in opera, the Viennese public has taken Bernstein to its bosom; on records, his lush readings with the Vienna Philharmonic of the complete Beethoven and Brahms symphonies, no less than his spacious and even languid Vienna *Rosenkavalier* and his Bavarian Radio *Tristan und Isolde*, have gone a long way toward changing the image of Bernstein in this country as well as abroad from one of a hard-driving, motorically exciting and ever youthful American conductor to that of a relaxed, expansive European wise man of music.

But even the greatest conductors come and go, while composers can remain forever. What of the compositions, for the writing of which Bernstein left the New York Philharmonic? Here the record is dismaying. It has now been sixteen years since Bernstein conducted his last concerts as Music Director in New York; in that time he has written scarcely more than a handful of reasonably large-scale compositions: *Mass* (Theatre Piece, 1971), *Dybbuk* (ballet, 1974), *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue* (musical, 1976), *Songfest* (song cycle 1977), *Divertimento* (orchestral suite, 1980), *Halil* (Nocturne for Solo Flute, String Orchestra and Percussion, 1981), and *A Quiet Place* (opera, 1983).

Except for *Mass*, a *succès de scandale* on its premiere, most of these works now seem no more than highly visible *Gebrauchsmusik*, compositions written for specific purposes and hardly memorable beyond the initial uses to which they were put. All their outward intensity of feeling, melodic attractiveness, and high craftsmanship have not altered the impression that their greatest

virtue has been a negative one: an absence of the ugliness and even inept writing widely associated nowadays with new music.

Dybbuk, for example, was written for Jerome Robbins to choreograph; on its own, even in the composer's concert version, the music lacks the capacity to transcend its origin as a ballet. The determinedly eclectic *Songfest*, written to mark the Bicentennial, draws from so many poetic and artistic sources that it appears without any single integrating, individual voice.

Divertimento, written to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, is suffused by Bernstein's touching nostalgia for the Boston Symphony whose director he never became; as music the composition is no more than a congerie of forms and styles, ranging from the waltz and the mazurka to the blues and a Sousa march, all characterized with the elegance and grace of a born pasticheur. By contrast, the emotional world of *Halil*, a tribute to an Israeli flutist-soldier killed in the 1973 war with Egypt, does invoke the affecting image of an oriental shepherd boy piping at night in a desert by turns peaceful and war-torn. The result, though both melodic and dramatic, still seems to suffer from a conceptual flaw: the composer's inability to make an artistic choice between his sadness over lost young manhood and his recognition of a warrior's—and a country's—need to fight for survival.

It would be kinder to pass quickly over Bernstein's two tries, since he left the Philharmonic, at writing traditionally staged works for voice. *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue* was the composer's attempt, with the collaboration of Alan Jay Lerner, to write a Broadway musical on the occasion of the Bicentennial. What Broadway historian Gerald Bordman described as a "servant's eye-view of the White House from Washington to Teddy Roosevelt" turned out to be, again in Bordman's words, "a one-week fiasco." The composer himself must agree: *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue* is not included in the list of compositions appended to *Findings*, his most recent (1982) collection of writings.

A Quiet Place, the sequel to *Trouble in Tahiti*, Bernstein's 1952 opera of suburban life, was jointly commissioned by the Houston Grand Opera, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington and the Teatro alla Scala in Milan. The composer's score seems a kind of neo-Puccinian attempt at melodic writing, unfortunately accomplished without Puccini's emotional force. The effect of the Houston premiere on the *Times*' Donal Henahan was crushingly clear: "To call the result a pretentious failure," Henahan wrote, "is putting it kindly."

Whatever the ultimate rank of *Mass*, the earliest of his major post-Philharmonic works, there can be no doubt that it did make an impression upon its first appearance, though perhaps not the impression the composer had intended. Commissioned (at the suggestion of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis) for the opening of the Kennedy Center in Washington, the work represented a late stage in Bernstein's lifelong career as an enthusiastic leveller of cultural barriers and distinctions. Following in the footsteps of such musical theater successes as *Hair* (1968) and *Godspell* (1971), *Mass* was based on the Roman Catholic liturgy, but also included additional texts by Stephen Schwartz (composer and lyricist of *Godspell*) and Bernstein himself.

As might have been expected, Bernstein and his collaborator did not leave the Roman service unaltered. A notable change was the repetition, in the original Hebrew words, of the Latin

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus
Dominus Deus Sabaoth.
Pleni sunt coeli et terra
Gloria tuae.
Benedictus qui venit in
nomine Domini

(Holy Holy Holy
Lord God of Hosts.
Heaven and earth are full of
Thy glory.
Blessed is he who comes in the
name of the Lord).

Nor was this merging of Catholic and Jewish religious observance the only syncretism *Mass* essayed in its attempt to be all things to all men. Throughout the work passages of traditional prayer were made to alternate with lines redolent of the 1960s in the Haight-Ashbury world:

PREACHER: God made us the boss
 God gave us the cross
 We turned it into a sword
 To spread the Word of the
 Lord
 We use His holy decrees
 To do whatever we please.

CHORUS: Yeah!

PREACHER: And it was good!

CHORUS: Yeah!

ALL: And it was good, Yeah!
 And it was goddam good!

The cast of this extravaganza of quasi-religious universal brotherhood includes street people and dancers. The pit orchestra consists of a concert organ and a "rock" organ, in addition to the usual strings and percussion; the costumed stage orchestra includes brass, woodwinds, electric guitars, and keyboards. The music itself is a hodge-podge of classical and jazz, serious and pop, folk and rock, opera and Broadway. The whole effect is one of sentimentality and fuzzy thinking run amok. Most charitably put, it all sounds like an artifact of its troubled time, a zany *Parsifal* produced by The Living Theater.

Mass, in all its florid display of feeling, is an authentic reflection of the caring, sharing Bernstein public persona which intimates swear is the real Lenny. The persona was described at its most fragrant, and wittily impaled, by Tom Wolfe in his now historic *New York* magazine article "Radical Chic." This merciless dissection of a 1970 fundraising party the conductor and his late wife actress Felicia Montealegre gave in their Park Avenue apartment for the Black Panthers stressed Bernstein's political naïvete, the happy indulgence of a media star's ability to support the claims of the enraged

spokesmen for the poor while at the same time living like a millionaire.

The verdict on Bernstein's one major attempt at music education in the 1970s has also been unfavorable. In giving the 1973 Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard (telecast on PBS, issued on records by CBS, and published three years later in book form as *The Unanswered Question*), Bernstein was speaking from a platform which had previously been graced by, among others, Igor Stravinsky, Paul Hindemith, and Copland. As his contribution Bernstein chose to base a defense of tonality in music (as against the twelve-tone system of Arnold Schoenberg) on the transformational grammar of Noam Chomsky, the noted linguist then at the height of his reputation as a radical opponent of the Vietnam War. As always Bernstein's delivery of both words and musical examples was earnest and persuasive, though perhaps even more marked than in the past by a tendency to wallow in his own glamour; the problem lay not simply in the presentation but also in the basing of eminently plausible conclusions on so difficult and perhaps tangential a foundation as the work of Chomsky, thus enraging people who knew more about Chomsky and linguistics than Bernstein did while at the same time bewildering the music-loving audience he was addressing.

Throughout his long career, Leonard Bernstein has been criticized by friend and foe alike for his seeming inability to concentrate on just one of his several musical talents. These critics have been responding to a well-nigh universal perception that this remarkably gifted individual has achieved in no one area what his genius seemed to promise in several. Now, as Bernstein approaches the eighth decade of his life—and his sixth decade of musical creativity—it is difficult not to feel that his fulfillment as a great artist seems even further from him than it did twenty years ago.

His claim to be our true American combiner of traditional symphonic greatness with authentic Broadway melody and appeal,

so brilliantly staked out with the *Jeremiah* Symphony, *Fancy Free*, and *On the Town*, seems to have bogged down in bathetic ideology, facile wit, and mere commercialism. His promise as the first homegrown conductor to perform European masterpieces in our own American way seems to have become a kind of outdoing the great Austro-German baton wielders at their own game. His magnificent abilities as a pianist have spurred him neither to write an important body of works for the keyboard, nor even to exert a major influence on his performing colleagues. Finally, his heaven-sent gifts for the electronic communication of high musical art have foundered on the twin shoals of over-intellectualization and exaggerated self-promotion.

It is difficult to know whether what we now see as Bernstein's disappointing achievement is due to an excess of disparate talents, or, conversely, to some ultimate flaw in their basic constitution. Not being a psychologist, the critic is surely more comfortable discussing what is, not what might have

been. In any case, the best refutation of any speculative approach to understanding Bernstein's creative fate was given by his associate Jack Gottlieb as the conclusion to the composer's entry in the 1971 *Dictionary of Contemporary Music*: "Critics . . . have said he would become a better musician if he concentrated on only one musical discipline to the exclusion of others. The fact is that had he followed their advice, he would have ceased to be himself."

Two things, however, are abundantly clear about Leonard Bernstein. He is the most generously gifted artist in American musical history; his achievement, whatever it eventually may prove to be, will always be judged not in its own terms, but in those of the extravagant hopes his great artistic endowment has engendered. Because he is still very much an active artist, because he is so talented, because he is so unpredictable, he continues to be the stuff of which our musical dreams are made. That is why, just as he was almost forty-two years ago, Lenny is still on our minds.

Heidegger at Freiburg, 1933

by Roger Kimball

Near the end of April, 1933, Martin Heidegger was elected rector of Freiburg University. At the same time, from May, 1933, until his resignation of the rectorate the following February, he was also a member of the Nazi party. Heidegger was then in his mid-forties. His early work, culminating in the epochal *Being and Time* (1927)—one of the most difficult, influential, and certainly one of the most controversial books of philosophy produced in this century—lay behind him. Ahead lay equally formidable essays on language, art, and technology, as well as numerous essays and monographs on key figures in the Western philosophical tradition, from Parmenides and Anaximander to Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche.

Though he has as many detractors as devotees, Heidegger is without doubt among the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. He is a pervasive force in contemporary theology, psychology, and literary criticism as well as in philosophy. Among his contemporaries, only Wittgenstein rivals him in the depth and extent of his influence. And despite his sometimes forbiddingly abstruse language, there is something uniquely sagelike about Heidegger. Philosophy for him was no merely intellectual pursuit. It was a clarion to “authentic being,” a quest for meaning.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger sought to raise the question of meaning in the most fundamental and far-reaching way by asking “What is the meaning of Being?” Words

like “authenticity,” “guilt,” “fallenness,” and “resolve” abound in the book, imbuing it with an edifying, quasi-religious aura. His avowed atheism—Heidegger followed Nietzsche in affirming that “God is dead”—only added to the effect. His impassioned grappling with the void made his philosophy seem piquantly spiritual and yet up-to-date, a continuation of religion by other means.

In later essays, Heidegger adopted a more lyrical, if no less edifying, manner. Increasingly, he turned to poets—especially to Hölderlin, Trakl, and Rilke—for clues to the meaning of Being. But he also pondered such existentially fertile problems as the vocation of art in the modern age, the uncertain future of philosophy, and the threat posed to modern man by the dominance of science and technological thinking. In an age when philosophy often seemed to be little more than an elaborate conceptual game, divorced from man’s deepest concerns, Heidegger’s meditations promised new life for philosophy and won him a large and enthusiastic following.

All this—Heidegger’s prestige as a thinker, his enormous influence, his attention to the problem of authenticity—make his assumption of the Freiburg rectorate and association with the Nazis in 1933 extremely disturbing. One might object that no one could have foretold the barbarous character of the Nazi regime that early. After all, the invasion of Poland was nearly six years away, the *Kristallnacht* nearly five. But by the end of

April, 1933, when Heidegger took office, it was later than we might like to imagine. Hitler had become chancellor of a coalition cabinet in the disintegrating Weimar Republic on January 30. It is true that he did not achieve full control of the government until after the death of Hindenburg in July, 1934. But he managed to eliminate any real opposition almost immediately. By the end of February he had enacted an emergency decree, "For the Protection of the People and the State," that effectively suspended civil rights. In April, he enacted legislation for the reconstruction of the civil service that called for the summary retirement of all civil servants of "non-Aryan" descent. He had thus embarked at once on his program of *Gleichschaltung*, of "unification" or reconstruction, which aimed at bringing all aspects of German life, not least German academic life, into line with the ideals of the National Socialist state. In March of 1933, a fitting symbol of those ideals appeared near Dachau: the Nazi's first concentration camp was publicly opened under the direction of "Acting Police-President of the City of Munich," Heinrich Himmler.

What does it mean that a thinker of Heidegger's stature, a thinker who challenges the superficiality and blindness of this "dark age," who searchingly traces the course of Western thought in order to glean some hints of man's *ethos* and place in the world—what does it mean that this philosopher should emerge as rector of Freiburg University at the very moment when everything that the German university stood for was being swept away in a frenzy of revolution? What was his involvement with the Nazis? What connections, if any, are there between his thought and the National Socialist ideology? And what are the implications of Heidegger's behavior during and after the rectorate for the moral authority of his philosophy?

The publication of two central documents from that period in Heidegger's career provides an apt occasion to consider these questions. Both "The Self-Assertion of the

German University," the address that Heidegger delivered in May, 1933, to mark his assumption of the rectorate, and "The Rectorate 1933/34. Facts and Thoughts," an *apologia* that he wrote in 1945, appear for the first time in English in the current (March 1985) issue of the philosophical quarterly, *The Review of Metaphysics*.¹ Together with Heidegger's 1966 interview for the German newsweekly *Der Spiegel*,² these

1 *The Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 3. *Die Selbstbehauptung der deutschen Universität. Rede, gehalten bei der feierlichen Übernahme des Rektorats der Universität Freiburg i. Br. am 27. 5. 1933* and *Das Rektorat 1933/34. Tatsachen und Gedanken* are translated, together with a brief preface by Heidegger's son, Dr. Hermann Heidegger, by Karsten Harries, professor of philosophy at Yale University and author of several well-known articles on Heidegger. The rectoral address was first published by Korn Verlag, Breslau, in 1933; according to Professor Harries, "Facts and Thoughts" was first published in a bilingual French-German edition in *Phi*, a supplement to *Annales de l'Université de Toulouse Le Mirail*, 1976, under the title "L'Auto-affirmation de université allemande," translation by Gérard Granel. Both were republished by Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, in 1983. The Klostermann edition provides the text for Professor Harries's translation.

2 "Nur ein Gott kann uns retten," *Der Spiegel*, No. 23, 1976. Heidegger granted the interview on the condition that it be published only after his death, hence the delay in publication. There are several English translations. I refer in this essay to the one by David Schendler, "Only a God Can Save Us Now," which appeared in the *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter 1977. Additional documents relating to Heidegger's rectorate are collected in Guido Schneeberger's *Nachlese zu Heidegger. Dokumente zu seinem Leben und Denken*, Bern, 1962. It should be noted, however, that Schneeberger's bias against Heidegger makes the collection a sometimes untrustworthy guide to the historical record. The reader may also wish to consult George Steiner's *Martin Heidegger* (Viking Press, 1979). Though it is philosophically undistinguished, Steiner's monograph does contain a useful discussion of Heidegger's rectorate.

pieces are perhaps the best introduction to the significance of Heidegger's political engagement as rector of Freiburg University.

The chronology of Heidegger's rectorate can be quickly summarized. Wilhelm von Möllendorf, a distinguished anatomist, had himself only just taken up the office on April 16, 1933. But as a Social Democrat, Möllendorf was unacceptable to the new regime and was forced out almost immediately. Heidegger tells us that he agreed to succeed him only very reluctantly; he had had virtually no administrative experience and was politically unaffiliated. "Thus it was uncertain," he writes in "Facts and Thoughts," "whether those at the center of political power would listen to me and to what seemed to me necessity and task." But though he had not previously belonged to any political party, Heidegger consented to join the Nazi party soon after he assumed the rectorate. He claims in "Facts and Thoughts" that he joined "only in the interest of the university" and on "the expressly acknowledged condition that I would never take on a party office or engage in any party activity." And as it happened, Heidegger's own tenure, both as a party member and as rector, was brief. His repeated defiance of official policy—he appointed Jewish deans, for example, prohibited the posting of the so-called "Jew Notice" on university property, and forbade a scheduled book burning of "decadent" literature—quickly led him into conflict with Nazi authorities. Matters came to a head near the end of February 1934. Heidegger was asked to remove two deans he had appointed, Möllendorf, who was dean of medicine, and Erik Wolf, dean of law. He refused. Just ten months after he became rector, Heidegger resigned in protest, withdrawing from any further involvement in university, or national, politics.

These features of Heidegger's rectorate—its brevity, its frequent opposition to Nazi policy—have prompted many to come forward in his defense. Hannah Arendt, for example, writes in her anniversary essay, "Heidegger at Eighty," that Heidegger "corrected his own 'error' more quickly

and more radically than many of those who later sat in judgment over him—he took considerably greater risks than were usual in German literary and university life during that period."³ And it should also be noted that at no time was Heidegger simply a Nazi ideologue. Arendt attributes his association with the Nazis more to a *déformation professionnelle* than to any programmatic ideology. An "attraction to the tyrannical," she rightly observes, "can be demonstrated theoretically in many of the great thinkers" from Plato on down. (She singles out Kant as the great exception.) Indeed—though this does nothing to exonerate the "great thinkers" from any political malfeasance they may be guilty of—it is probably the case that the attraction is generally not to the tyrannical as such but to the order and unity that tyranny promises. Heidegger's own understanding of Fascism, Arendt suggests, derived more from the Italian futurists than from National Socialism. In this context, she claims that Heidegger never read *Mein Kampf*, though naturally one must wonder to what extent he could have been unaware of its contents. But it is true that the racial policies that formed the core of the Nazi ideology played no part in Heidegger's thought or in his handling of the rectorate. His appointment of Jewish deans, admission of Jewish students to his classes, and continued relations with Jewish colleagues after he became rector make allegations of anti-Semitism insupportable.

Furthermore, as Heidegger was quick to point out, the Nazis were from the begin-

3 "Heidegger at Eighty," reprinted in *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy*, Yale University Press, 1978, pp. 293-303. It should of course be borne in mind that Arendt was once, in the mid- to late-Twenties, romantically involved with Heidegger, who was her mentor at Freiburg. But Arendt's relationship with Heidegger does not *eo ipso* disqualify her assessment of his political behavior, which, in my view, is astute and evenhanded. For a discussion of Arendt's relation with Heidegger, see Elizabeth Young-Bruehl's *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (Yale University Press, 1982), especially pages 50ff and 69ff.

ning uneasy about his allegiance. His rectoral address was even considered subversive by some. As its very title suggests, "The Self-Assertion of the German University" proclaimed the spiritual autonomy of academic life. The university, Heidegger insisted, must be allowed to govern itself. "Self-governance means: to set our own task, to determine ourselves the way and manner in which it is to be realized, so that thus we shall be what we ought to be." Of course none of this accorded with the Nazi dictum of absolute submission to the state.

Also, for all its talk of leadership, there was no mention of *the* leader, of Hitler, in the address; neither was there mention of National Socialism. And Heidegger pointedly declared that genuine leadership must recognize the autonomy and freedom of those who follow. "All leading must grant the body of followers its own strength. All following, however, bears resistance within itself. This essential opposition of leading and following must not be obscured, let alone eliminated." But perhaps most remarkably, the crucial concept of race did not figure in Heidegger's address at all. It is perhaps also worth noting that the Nazis had the address withdrawn from circulation soon after Heidegger resigned the rectorate. Subsequently, many of Heidegger's works, including *Being and Time*, were banned or restricted by the Nazis. After his resignation, Heidegger was as a matter of course put under surveillance; he was excluded from German delegations to philosophical meetings; and his work was publicly excoriated by party hacks. Finally, in 1944, he was judged one of the "most dispensable" scholars and was sent briefly to the Upper Rhine to dig trenches.

Still, there are many complications in the story and aftermath of Heidegger's rectorate. Some are trivial. For example, Heidegger claims that his acceptance of the rectorate was conditional upon his being elected by a unanimous vote—which, he claims, the plenum of the university vouchsafed him. But the German historian Hugo Ott maintains that Heidegger fell three votes short of

unanimity. In both the *Spiegel* interview and "Facts and Thoughts," Heidegger presents himself as a selfless champion of the "essence of the German university," above infighting and petty academic politics. He accepted the rectorate, he tells us, solely for the good of the university and then only on the repeated urging of his colleagues Möllendorf and Joseph Sauer, Möllendorf's immediate predecessor as rector. But it appears that Möllendorf and Sauer harbored considerably more qualms about Heidegger's qualifications—and ambitions—for the rectorate than he admits. According to Ott, for example, Sauer writes in his diary that a mutual colleague, Walter Eucken, came to him to complain about Heidegger "acting solely for his own interests according to the Führer system. He clearly feels that he is the born philosopher and spiritual Führer of the new movement, the only great and towering thinker since Heraclitus."

Throughout his remarks about the rectorate Heidegger suggests that he maintained a careful distance from the party leadership. But Ott cites a telegram from Heidegger to Hitler, dated May 20, 1933, in which Heidegger circumvents the usual channels of appeal in order to petition for a postponement of a planned reception for university leaders "until such time as the *Gleichschaltung*"—which he noted was especially necessary at Freiburg—could be completed, presumably to strengthen his own position among the rectors.⁴ While it is difficult to sort through the convoluted details of Heidegger's rectorate, it does appear that his motives in accepting the office were not as divorced from ordinary academic politics and power-grabbing as he would have us believe. In fact, it is plausible to conjecture that Heidegger, having finally decided to throw himself into university politics, aimed at becoming the Führer of university Führers,

4 Sauer's diary entry and Heidegger's telegram to Hitler are cited in Hugo Ott, "Martin Heidegger als Rektor der Universität Freiburg 1933/34," unpublished lecture. The authenticity of Sauer's diary, it should be noted, has been questioned.

the spiritual leader of the entire German university system.

Yet charges of Heidegger's opportunism or careerism—though not, I think, without substance—are in the end of secondary importance. For they fail to address the two really disturbing aspects of his political behavior: his persistent blindness to the evil of Nazism during his rectorate and his retreat to utter political quietism in subsequent years. Both permanently compromise Heidegger's authority as a moral or even (given his understanding of philosophy) a philosophical inspiration.

Heidegger's blindness to the reality of Hitler's reign is evident even in the terms he used to describe his goals for the rectorate. As Heidegger saw it, the task facing the university in 1933 was to overcome the fragmentation and artificial division among disciplines that overspecialization had created. In his view, opposition from the entrenched old guard of the university, who would seek to preserve the *status quo*, was just as much a threat to the spiritual mission of the university as were the Nazis, whose idea of reform was to politicize the very idea of scholarship. "What let me hesitate until the very last day to assume the rectorate," he wrote in "Facts and Thoughts,"

was the knowledge that with what I intended I would necessarily run into a twofold conflict with both the "new" and the "old." The "new" meanwhile had appeared in the form of "political [that is, "politicized"] science," the very idea of which rests on a falsification of the essence of truth. The "old" was the effort to remain responsible to one's "specialty," to help advance it and to utilize such advance in instruction There was thus the danger that both the "new" and the "old," opposed as they were to one another, would equally fight my attempt and make it impossible It was never my intention to realize only party doctrines and to act in accord with the "idea" of a "political science." But I was equally unwilling to defend only what had been established, and, by merely mediating and smoothing dis-

agreements, to level everything and keep it in mediocrity.

Simply as a piece of rhetoric, this passage invites scrutiny. One notes, for instance, the distanced, sanitized effect that Heidegger achieves by referring abstractly to "the 'new'" (the quotation marks are essential) when he means the Nazi program for a politicized scholarship. The elevated, academic language, with its careful balancing of this against that, materially contributes to the appearance of disinterestedness.

But there is something very wrong here. How can the problem of academic "mediocrity" be accorded equal weight with the brutality of Hitler's program? In accepting the rectorate, Heidegger apparently hoped to regenerate the university, steering it on a course relatively free from the rebarbative elements of Nazi influence. In this he might seem to have been guilty of an extraordinary naïveté. In fact, though, his entire performance displays less a naïveté than a willed blindness. For by April of 1933 there could be no doubt about the impact of Nazism on German cultural life. Scholars, scientists, and artists were fleeing Germany in droves: Adorno, Albers, Brecht, Cassirer (himself the rector of Hamburg University from 1930-1933), the brothers Mann, Einstein, Panofsky, Tillich—they and scores of others emigrated from Germany in 1933. It is inconceivable that Heidegger could have been unaware of this exodus or of its cause. For one invested as Heidegger was not only with the institutional authority of the rectorate but also with the far weightier authority of his reputation as a philosopher, acquiescence amounted to complicity. In a situation so pregnant with consequence, his blindness was not merely a failure of insight. It is perhaps in just this sense that Plato meant us to equate evil with ignorance. Heidegger's hope of reforming the university under the aegis of Nazism tokened a moral as well as an intellectual failure.

Moreover, whatever Heidegger's agenda for the university, he was not above engaging in the most blatant propaganda. Among

his more loathsome efforts in this direction was an adjuration on behalf of Hitler that appeared in the Freiburg student newspaper in November, 1933: "Precepts and ideas are not now the rules of your being," he declared, "the Führer is your one and only present and future German reality and law." How can that jibe with his insistence on the autonomy of the university? In the *Spiegel* interview, Heidegger suggests that such statements were merely necessary compromises, compromises whose seriousness was not evident because the Nazis had not yet revealed the scope of their plans for Germany and enemies of the Reich. "When I took the rectorate over," he told the *Spiegel* interviewers, "I knew I couldn't get by without compromises. I would not write those sentences today. I wouldn't have said them anymore by 1934." (The Roehm purge, in which Hitler had one hundred and fifty of his political opponents murdered, took place in June and July of 1934.) But given Heidegger's insistence on autonomy and the necessary tension between leader and follower, such statements are more than tactical concessions. In affirming Hitler as "the one and only present and future German reality and law," Heidegger did not compromise *for the sake* of his ideals; he compromised his ideals themselves.

And if there are passages of the rectoral address that assert the independence of the university and the dignity of its intellectual vocation, passages that led some Nazis to question its ideological allegiance, there are also numerous passages that shamelessly pander to the party line. In fact, one often finds apparently conflicting sentiments co-existing side by side in the same paragraph. "To give the law to oneself is the highest freedom," Heidegger affirms, sounding like Kant; but he then explains how this "highest freedom" is to be realized:

The much celebrated "academic freedom" is being banished from the German university; for this freedom was not genuine, since it was only negative. It meant primarily freedom from concern, arbitrariness of intentions and

inclinations, lack of restraint in what was done and left undone. The concept of the freedom of the German student is now brought back to its truth. Henceforth the bond [*Bindung*] and service of the German student will unfold from this truth.

It is possible, of course, to take Heidegger's side and argue that "real" freedom, academic or otherwise, is not arbitrariness and "freedom from concern" but rather consists in an insight into and compliance with the underlying nature of reality. Freedom is to be opposed not to necessity but to mere caprice, accident, spontaneity. As Heidegger put it in "The Origin of the Work of Art": "He who truly knows what is knows what he wills to do in the midst of what is." But who can claim truly to know what is? And who, listening to this address in 1933, would harken to such subtlety? What mattered to Heidegger's audience was not talk of "giving the law to oneself" but banishing the "much celebrated academic freedom" from the German university. Whatever its objective validity, in the historical context Heidegger's argument is sophistry, a use of truth to propagate deception.

But in attempting to understand why Heidegger would indenture himself to the cause of Hitler's regime, we should not underestimate his genuine attraction to certain aspects of National Socialism. Its romantic conjuring of the destiny of an historical people rooted to a particular place by work, tradition, and shared values had a particular appeal for him. It was primarily Heidegger's sense of his own mission on behalf of the spiritual welfare of the German nation that led him into collaboration with the Nazis. He began his rectoral address by asserting that his assumption of the office was a commitment to the "spiritual leadership" of the German university. Such leadership must have the courage and insight to will the "essence of the German university," and thus to realize "that unyielding spiritual mission that forces the fate of the German people to bear the stamp of its history."

As Karsten Harries has shown in his essay on "Heidegger as a Political Thinker,"⁵ "The Self-Assertion of the German University" is a pivotal document in the evolution of Heidegger's political thought. It looks back to the analysis of authenticity in *Being and Time*, forward to Heidegger's understanding of community in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* and "The Origin of the Work of Art." Hence the similarity between the rhetoric of the rectoral address and the rhetoric of National Socialism is not accidental or merely a product of Heidegger's efforts at propaganda. Rather, it has its foundation in Heidegger's own romantic view of the tasks of the university and function of the state. It is here that we find decisive affinities between Heidegger's philosophy and the tenets of National Socialism. Despite the individualism implicit in his concept of authenticity, Heidegger consistently held that true freedom demands the integration of the individual into the historical community, the *Volk*. The spiritual world that the university is called upon to forge is, he writes in a phrase that chillingly recalls the Nazis' *Blut und Boden* (blood and earth) rhetoric, the "power that most deeply preserves a people's strengths, which are tied to earth and blood." In "Facts and Thoughts," Heidegger wrote that he

saw in the movement that had gained power the possibility of an inner recollection and renewal of the people and a path that would allow it to discover its historical vocation in the Western world. I believed that, renewing itself, the university might also be called to contribute to this inner self-collection of the people, providing it with a measure The rectorate was an attempt to see in the "movement" that had come to power, beyond all its failings and crudities, something that reached much farther and that might some day bring about a gathering of what is German unto the historical essence of the West.

5 Reprinted in *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy*, pp. 304-328.

Of course, it is difficult for us to see the connection between Hitler's murderous regime and Heidegger's dream of "an inner recollection and renewal" of the German people. It is now clear that the essence of Nazism did not lie somewhere behind its "failings and crudities," as Heidegger euphemistically put it. Its failings and crudities—indeed, its unmitigated brutality and crimes—were the essence that Hitler's rhetoric and a damaged nation's powerful will to believe somehow managed to conceal. It is thus easy to understand how Erich Heller could preface an essay on Heidegger and Hölderlin with the angry charge that

again and again, in speeches, pronouncements, and official letters he verbally behaved as if, with the arrival of Hitler, Being had unexpectedly and triumphantly returned to Time, choosing as its vessel the German nation [W]hat Heidegger did in 1933 came close to announcing the bankruptcy of a philosopher and a philosophy, a total failure of the intuition of Being without which his philosophy would be as nothing.⁶

In reflecting on Heidegger's actions at this time, however, it is important to remind ourselves of how mesmerizing Hitler could be. Heidegger was far from being alone in his misplaced hopes. Though he articulated those hopes in more elevated terms than the ordinary German, he, too, saw in Hitler a way out of the economic and social morass in which Germany found itself in the late Twenties and early Thirties. Like many Germans—and distinguished statesmen and journalists outside Germany—Heidegger was seduced by Hitler's promise of national renewal. The Nazis' militarism and anti-Jewish sentiments were perfectly apparent to anyone who cared to look, but the very enormity of their plans for social engineering made it easy to dismiss them as impossi-

6 "Thinking about Poetry, Hölderlin and Heidegger," in *In the Age of Prose: Literary and Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 65-83.

ble. As late as the winter of 1934, many moderate German politicians were convinced that Hitler could be “contained” and manipulated to do their bidding.

Unfortunately, such reflections do not exonerate Heidegger from the charge of collaboration with the Nazis. Nor do they excuse his subsequent evasiveness about his statements and actions as rector. Indeed, Heidegger’s evasiveness and obfuscations, patent throughout his retrospective interpretations of the rectorate, contribute greatly to making the entire episode so repugnant. Germany’s students, Heidegger correctly observes in the rectoral address, were “on the march.” Their “bond” to the new order would henceforth express itself in a three-fold service to the community: in labor service, armed service, and “knowledge” service. The three are said to be “equally primordial,” but Heidegger writes that in the future armed service will “encompass and penetrate the entire being of the student.”

Some commentators have pointed out that Heidegger’s notion of the three services here alludes to Plato’s discussion of the three parts of the soul in *The Republic*. No doubt this is true. But it is also irrelevant. As Professor Harries notes apropos this passage in “Heidegger as a Political Thinker,” “no matter what the antecedents, in the context of the time this had to be understood as propaganda for Hitler.” The same holds true for other key terms in the address. When Heidegger used the term “*Volk*,” he was no doubt drawing on a tradition whose roots run to Herder and Hölderlin; but in the context of his rectoral address, the term recalls not the nationalism of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German romanticism but the virulent racial fantasies of twentieth-century Nazism. To pretend otherwise is mendacious pedantry.

The point is that our words and actions acquire meaning not in a vacuum but in a particular social and historical context. To bracket that context is to miss the truth of the words and actions. The word “bourgeois,” for example, meant one thing in nineteenth-century France, quite another in

Stalin’s Russia. In the address, Heidegger tells us that his three services will “coalesce” and become one force. Students and teachers, he writes, “must confront one another, ready for battle [*Kampf*]. All faculties of will and thought, all strengths of the heart and all skills of the body, must be unfolded *through* battle, heightened *in* battle, and preserved *as* battle.” He later noted the influence of Ernst Jünger, author of the notorious *Der Arbeiter*, with its glorification of conflict and war, on this passage. In the address, he immediately follows his discussion of battle with an approving reference to Carl von Clausewitz, whose posthumous *On War* defined war as “diplomacy carried on by other means” and first introduced the notion of “total war.” But in “Facts and Thoughts” Heidegger claims to have mentioned armed service “neither in a militaristic, nor in an aggressive sense, . . . I understood defense as self-defense.” The attitude of the address is “oriented towards ‘battle,’” he admits, but “‘Battle’ is thought in the sense of Heraclitus, fragment 53.” It is worth dwelling on this suggestion if only to appreciate the full force of Heidegger’s breathtaking evasiveness.

A literal translation of the Heraclitus fragment is “War [*polemos*] is father of all things, king of all things, and reveals some to be gods, others men, makes some slaves, others free.” Heidegger tells us that *polemos* really means *eris*, a term that can mean “war” but is more usually translated as “conflict” or “strife.” Further, he says, *polemos* is not to be understood in the sense of *real* conflict, but as “confrontation-that-sets-those-who-confront-one-another-apart, so that in such setting apart the essential being of those who confront one another exposes itself, . . . [and] enters into what is unconcealed and true.” Professor Harries accurately renders Heidegger’s translation of the fragment as follows: “Setting-apart is indeed the sowing of all, but also (and above all) it is of all what is highest—what preserves—and this because it lets the ones show themselves as gods, the others, however, as humans, because it lets the ones step into the open as bondsmen,

the others as free beings.” (One is not surprised to learn that Heidegger’s translations of the pre-Socratics are only slightly less controversial than Ezra Pound’s meditations on the Chinese ideograph.)

In a note to this passage, Harries observes that “Heidegger’s translation of the Heraclitus fragment offers a key to his use of the difficult to translate *Anseinandersetzung*, which means ‘confrontation,’ but a confrontation that is a setting apart that lets those who are thus set apart reveal themselves.” Perhaps so. But while Heidegger’s idiosyncratic translation of Heraclitus may give us insight into the mysteries of pre-Socratic thought or Heidegger’s own “confrontation” or dialogue with other thinkers, it simply evades the issue of his use of the term “battle” in the rectoral address. For one thing, *pace* Heidegger, *polemos* means “war,” as in the Trojan War, the Thirty Years War, the Second World War; it is not a “setting-apart” that lets Being appear but an activity in which large numbers of real people systematically kill and maim each other. But more important is Heidegger’s complete unwillingness to take responsibility for his statements. To speak of “battle” in Freiburg in 1933 is not to conjure up Heraclitus, fragment 53, but legions of goose-stepping men in brown shirts.

There is no doubt that Heidegger soon realized that his adventure in public life had gone disastrously awry. But in some ways, his subsequent withdrawal from political activity is even more questionable than his brief period of political engagement. For Heidegger, the problem was that the Nazis had betrayed the promise that was inherent in the ideals of National Socialism. In his view, National Socialism itself, which he saw as a force that challenged the uprooting progress of technology, articulated a noble, if unworkable, ideal. Thus in the 1953 edition of *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, he retained his remark from the original 1935 edition about the “inner truth and greatness” of National Socialism consisting in “the encounter between global technology

and modern man.” Reflecting on his rectorate in the *Spiegel* interview, Heidegger argued that

Since then, in the last 30 years, it’s certainly become clearer that the planetary movement of modern technology is a force whose magnitude can hardly be over estimated. For me the decisive question today is how this technological age can be subjected to a political system and to which system. I’ve no answer to that question but I’m not convinced that democracy is the way The task of thought is to help limit the dominance of technology so that man in general has an adequate relationship to its essence. Now Nazism moved in that direction but those persons were far too limited in their thinking to achieve a really explicit relationship to what had been happening now for 300 years.

Heidegger thus came to believe that the hegemony of technology was so complete that neither philosophy nor “any human contemplation and striving”—least of all the modern, democratic state—could direct or curtail its depredations. Hence, the authentic response is no longer *Entschlossenheit*, resolve that expresses itself in particular choices and actions, but *Gelassenheit*, “letting be,” an attitude of waiting and listening in which one *does* nothing, but remains open to the fugitive voice of Being. The task of thought may be to limit the dominance of technology, but Heidegger, for one, despaired of thought’s power to help: “Only a god can save us now.”

Yet once again, there is an exasperating evasiveness about Heidegger’s posture. For while he admitted making “mistakes” during his rectorate, he never once publicly acknowledged the enormity of the evil he was party to. Nor did he ever repudiate his involvement as rector of Freiburg University. To adduce “the planetary movement of modern technology” does nothing to absolve him of this responsibility. Whatever the merits of Heidegger’s analysis of modern technology, there is something repulsive—as well as deeply unphilosophical—about

his use of highminded philosophical language in the face of the most brutal reality of our time; far from revealing the underlying truth of the situation, Heidegger's language occludes it. As Hannah Arendt put it in her criticism of Heidegger's behavior, "this misunderstanding of what [the whole Nazi movement] was all about is inconsiderable when compared with the much more decisive 'error' that consisted in not only ignoring the relevant 'literature' but in escaping from the reality of the Gestapo cellars and the torture hells of the early concentration camps into ostensibly more significant regions." And

just as Heidegger escaped from confronting the reality of Nazism by filtering it through the transformative syllables of his philosophy, so he sought to escape from the reality of the modern world, essentially shaped as it is by science and technology, by placing it *tout court* beyond the competence of thought. It is a sad irony that Heidegger, a philosopher who began by speaking with rare eloquence about authenticity and the importance of attending to the elusive whisperings of reality, should have proven to be so deaf when reality burst in upon him with the harsh and agonizingly real strains of tyranny.

Matisse

by Jed Perl

This spring was a good time at the Museum of Modern Art. With the combined forces of Atget's photographs of Paris at the turn of the century, Rousseau's landscapes, portraits, and fantasies, and fifty years of Matisse drawings, MOMA had on hand a blockbuster-sized celebration of Paris, the classical center of modern art. These shows were hung by a curatorial staff that hasn't given in to the idea of the museum as a rat maze; the installations were human-scale, free-flowing. And visitors were feeling a special euphoria—at the Matisse show they were smiling, almost cooing—because they didn't have to fight against the kind of pre-packaged reactions enforced by MOMA's Primitivism show and the Van Gogh and Manet retrospectives at the Metropolitan last year.

Rousseau and Atget were pursuing their dream-like visions at the moment when Europe was first embracing the idea of the unconscious. Like sleepwalkers, they moved to the rhythm of the age. Brought together at MOMA, Rousseau (especially in his suburban landscapes) and Atget conveyed a feeling of turn-of-the-century Paris that was like perfume in the gallery air. They personified the spirit of the city and the time, and they amazed us because the effects in their work seemed to be achieved effortlessly, almost mindlessly. The Matisse drawing retrospective was bewildering in different ways.¹ Matisse is the most self-aware of artists, and his work, so very controlled, is

mysterious because he often arrives at his magical effects after consciously setting a problem for himself. Matisse is the artist who knows everything, has seen everything, has taken it all into account, and can still go it alone, where no one has gone before. From the brush-and-ink drawings of around 1900 through the erased and re-drawn charcoals of the 1930s, he keeps revealing himself anew.

While the Matisse drawing show was up, I read Pierre Schneider's enormous new book, *Matisse*,² which came out last Christmas and was the sensation of the gift-book season. Schneider's *Matisse*, like the catalogue John Elderfield produced for the MOMA show, is a post-formalist study. There's a lot of Merleau-Ponty in Elderfield, Nietzsche in Schneider, and Proust and Bergson in both. Elderfield, Director of Drawing at the Modern, speaks early in his text of Cézanne's need to fix objects "irrevocably to the flat resistant surface of

1 "The Drawings of Henri Matisse," which was on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from February 28 through May 14, was directed for MOMA by John Elderfield, Director of the Department of Drawing, with the collaboration of Magdalena Dabrowski, Assistant Curator of Drawing. The exhibition's catalogue, *The Drawings of Henri Matisse*, was published by Thames & Hudson; 312 pages, \$29.95.

2 *Matisse*, by Pierre Schneider (translated by Michael Taylor): Rizzoli, 752 pages, \$95.

modern pictorial art”: this is the kind of talk that makes modernist space sound like an awful ordeal that artists, for some strange reason, submit to. Elderfield is a New York City curator in love with Parisian culture. He wants to plumb the mysteries, but his chapter headings—“Epiphanies,” “Signs,” “Possessions,” “Illuminations”—promise revelations that never really occur. Schneider, though American-born, has spent most of his life in France, and he handles themes similar to Elderfield’s with greater ease. Schneider has the self-assurance of an insider; he’s up to his ears in the subject, and wants to tell us everything he knows.

Schneider’s 750-page monograph is rich in pleasures that are only to be found in very long books. After I had gotten through the first hundred or so pages I adjusted to the leisurely pace, and something about the rhythm of the argument, with all its digressions and divagations, became hard to resist. Schneider takes us under his wing in the way the encyclopedic novelists, historians, and philosophers of the nineteenth century did. He leads us up a steep mountain path which keeps revealing fresh vistas and from which, at the end, we look down on a whole new view of the world.

Though Schneider doesn’t have a gift for the shapeliness of literary art, his book reminds me in some other respects of André Malraux’s wonderful study of the late Picasso, *Picasso’s Mask*. (Schneider quotes a line from the Malraux.) Both Malraux and Schneider want to identify the unspoken passions that propel artists in a secular age; and both authors lead us toward the conclusion that great painting now bears the weight of a post-Christian yearning for the divine. I must confess to feeling a certain—I think it’s a very American—skepticism about the idea of the sacred in modern art. I suppose many of us here in the United States have a bit of the cowboy, pioneer spirit; we’ve junked faith and all that. And of course the split between secular and sacred on which Schneider insists—and insists, often, in a tiresome way—is nothing more

than approximate. But there’s more to Schneider’s and Malraux’s artist-searching-for-God than the café culture of St. Germain. Finally (after its own fashion) getting religion. It’s not easy in a secular age to account for the transcendent elements in our lives; maybe theological metaphors are unavoidable. What other language do we have?

No wonder Schneider and Elderfield both invoke Proust so often. Proust is the poet par excellence of the transcendent achieved through the experience of the everyday—through the taste of a biscuit, or the feel of irregular paving stones. Maybe Matisse is the Proust of painting; they’re both obsessive artists, reviewing close-at-hand themes endlessly. The mental peregrinations of Proust’s author-narrator can possibly give us clues to the workings of Matisse’s mind. But the viewer confronting Matisse’s drawings at MOMA cannot exactly travel on the artist’s mental journey—a drawing doesn’t contain the necessary information. Standing in front of the works, we’re less the knowing insider than the dazzled outsider—a character not from Proust but from Henry James.

There’s a key, emblematic episode in James’s *The Ambassadors*, when the American Lambert Strether is taken to visit the sculptor Gloriani in his Paris home. Strether is moved by the perfection of the old house and garden in the Faubourg St.-Germain, and by the beauty of the sculptor’s “medal-like Italian face.” What grips Strether, and really marks his conversion to Europe, is his recognition of the way the fine surfaces of Gloriani’s world resonate. Strether “had the sense of names in the air, of ghosts at the windows, of signs and tokens, of a whole range of expression all about him, too thick for prompt discrimination.” Ghosts, signs, tokens: exactly the elements Elderfield and Schneider are always seeing in Matisse. Strether wondered what was so bewitching. “Was it the most special flair, unequalled, supreme, of the aesthetic torch, lighting that wondrous world for ever, or was it, above all, the long, straight shaft sunk by a personal acuteness that life had seasoned to steel?” What astonished Strether in Gloriani was a

depth of experience no American artist had yet achieved—and has still not achieved. This is what bewilders us Americans in those greatest of Europeans—in Matisse at MOMA: “the long, straight shaft sunk by a personal acuteness that life had seasoned to steel.” Matisse is Schneider’s Gloriani, and his new book is about as close as anyone has come to understanding the mystery of those resonant Matisse surfaces.

Schneider’s is a loose, unruly book. Though the chapters—which stand pretty much separate and aren’t exactly chronological—make for easy dipping-in, *Matisse* is best read start to finish, so you can give yourself over to the argument and let it flow through you. When read this way, Schneider’s overall logic manages to carry most all else before it. I found Schneider’s capsule history of still-life art useful in relation to Matisse until he brought in Arcimboldo, the Mannerist concocter of emblems. Arcimboldo has nothing to tell us about Matisse; the only reason I could see for his inclusion was Schneider’s desire to work in some of the thoughts from Roland Barthes’s amusing, pyrotechnical little essay on Arcimboldo. Arcimboldo’s the perfect visual artist for Barthes—he’s all thought—but this has nothing to do with Matisse. The long discussion of *Harmony in Red*, which is generally convincing, also goes too far when Schneider insists on an argument about vestigial figures, memory traces from an earlier painting of a dining room that may or may not be a ghostly presence in *Harmony in Red*. Perhaps Schneider is right—I’m prepared to believe he has Matisse figured out—but he’s never going to prove it and his insistence gives the argument a silly air of psychobabble.

The miracle of Schneider’s *Matisse*, though, is how rarely the book gets derailed. Schneider is an art writer who really does have his feet planted firmly on the ground. He has the gift of descriptive writing, and can lay out the elements of a painting so as to clarify how they work together. He understands much about how influence works. His early chapters—on Matisse in

relation to Moreau and Puvis and Redon and Cézanne—are full of wonderfully chosen statements from everyone involved and cast new light on the process of artistic invention. He also has a way of finding the right leitmotif or image to unlock the cultural ethos of time past. Some passing comments show the relation between the Impressionists’ obsession with the instant and the obsession with historical accuracy (getting it down to the minute) in nineteenth-century academic painting. The few pages on Diaghilev and Nijinsky—with their discussion of the Nietzsche vogue around the same time—made me understand for the first time what the Ballets Russes miracle was all about. Another passage that reveals a time—in this case the neo-classicism and new artist-dealer relations of the post-World War I period—is the wonderful quotation from a 1919 letter sent by Juan Gris to Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler. “Courbet’s name has been bandied about a great deal this year. They’re trying to make a big deal of him in order to bring his prices up, and the painters are following tamely like dogs on a leash. They swear by Courbet and no one else.”

Schneider’s book might have been called *Matisse without Picasso*. This study of the invention of modern art, from Post-Impressionism to midcentury, all but entirely side-steps Cubism.

In Gertrude Stein’s odd little book about Picasso—very much an anti-Matisse book—she says that “In the nineteenth century painters discovered the need of always having a model in front of them, in the twentieth century they discovered that they must never look at a model.” Matisse she puts in a line “from Courbet to Matisse”: he’s essentially a nineteenth-century artist. I imagine Schneider would, in a way, agree, for his Matisse is very much a man who takes the long, slow path out of the nineteenth century. Schneider’s *Matisse* struggles all his life to assimilate the totality of perception to the flat surface of decoration. *Dance* and *Music*, painted in 1909 and 1910, when Matisse was entering his forties, are the

nineteenth-century tradition totally absorbed; his works of the 1920s are the nineteenth century reconsidered; the paper cutouts are a last fusion of time, matter, and perspective into the radiant surface of decoration. Analytic Cubism, emerging when Matisse was at work on *Dance* and *Music*, seems to Schneider inorganic, a squashing of reality to create paintings in which little scraps of real things stick out here and there. This is not necessarily a negative characterization, for many of the glories of Cubism—especially in its later, synthetic phases—derive precisely from the way reality pops out at you almost randomly. Break it up and put it together again any which way: this is the heart of Cubism and Picasso. Unify, bring together: this is the heart of Fauvism and Matisse.

Schneider's key to Matisse is decoration. That's of course everybody's key to Matisse. But Schneider has clarified the meaning of decoration better than I've seen it done before, and by doing so he has highlighted the extent to which Picasso and Cubism—even synthetic Cubism—have, really, rather little to do with decoration.

It goes without saying that in a work of decorative art the *cosa mentale* does not manifest itself in the same way as in a Leonardo da Vinci, a Raphael, or a Poussin. In the pictorial system elaborated in the Renaissance, the message is communicated *in* the work. The artist wishes to express laughter? Someone in the painting laughs. Pain? Someone in the canvas suffers. Movement? Figures move. But these facts can be deciphered only if we grant them all our attention: the part of ourselves that, in order to act, requires that the rest, in particular the subconscious, be neutralized. The analytical image belongs to analytical perception. Realism concentrates on one corner of space and isolates it, even if this entails connecting it to similar segments through intellectual reconstructions. Decorative space demands to be perceived not fragmentarily, but in its totality. It is the work as a whole that delivers the message, and not one of the forms contained in it. In order to express joy, it does not represent

a figure with a joyful expression: the whole work expresses joy. Decorative art does not represent its spiritual content: it designates it. The meaning is not *in* it but *behind* it.

For Schneider, the key to modern art is moved back from Cubism to Fauvism; not the breakup of things but the bringing of all things into one—into the decorative whole—is the essential act. Seen from this perspective, even Mondrian may appear more post-Matisse than post-Picasso.

Matisse derives decoration in large measure from Islam, and Schneider, thinking of the Islamic world, locates the historical origins of decoration in the idea of nomadism. The equalization of the image all over the surface is a metaphor of rootlessness—or, conversely, of being everywhere. The analogy to the all-over space of Islamic art and the more figural, but equally flat, expanses of Byzantine art (Matisse was deeply moved by Russian icons on his visit to Moscow in 1911) gives Schneider the metaphoric kernel of Matisse's art. What Schneider finds so Matissean about the Islamic analogy is the way Islamic art wrings content not from specific symbols but from the emotional implications of form-groupings. As Schneider sees it, Matisse's goal is not to infuse literary or symbolic meaning into a picture of nature but rather to carry the objects around him (what Schneider calls the secular realm) into the flat, unreal space of the picture (what he calls the sacred realm). The creation of the work of art involves a struggle to realize forms in two dimensions without recourse to a fictive third. The work's final meaning inheres not in narrative or symbol (though he often discusses these as a means of approach) but in our sense of a completed act of transformation. Schneider touches on symbolism where it is relevant; Matisse's relation to his teacher Moreau (who encouraged students to look to nature) and to Redon (several of whose works Matisse owned) are finely drawn. But Schneider knows that the literary strain in symbolist art is essentially inconsistent with the achievement of a modernist like Matisse.

In the catalogue of the MOMA show John Elderfield spends considerable space discussing Matisse's relation to Cubism. He is very cautious, obviously anxious not to impose Cubism on Matisse; he wants to see Cubism as "absorbed." Elderfield says that "In the drawings of this so-called Cubist period, 1914-16, we see Matisse's simplification of forms to increasingly geometric wholes; fragmentation of these wholes into their constituent geometry; then recomposition of the fragmented elements into newly abrupt, discontinuous sign systems that imagine the identities of objects with astonishing daring, and exactness." The "simplification of forms to increasingly geometric wholes" is of course there; but this isn't in itself especially Cubist. What would be Cubist is the "newly abrupt, discontinuous sign systems"; but the discontinuity that Elderfield is seeing in drawings like *Greta Prozor* (1915-16) is less a Cubist shuffling of space than a Cubist-style simplification of form. Elderfield knows this, and as you read his discussion, you begin to feel that he doesn't exactly believe there's a Cubist Matisse. It's as if Elderfield has to deal with a Cubist Matisse because it's an accepted thing, only to conclude that "these profound and mysterious drawings illustrate . . . not Cubist theory—nor theory of any kind." Yes—but what great work of art ever illustrated a theory?

The oddest element in Elderfield's Cubist discussion is the treatment of the *Madame Matisse with a Hat* (1915). The paintings of Madame Matisse are central to Matisse's development; Schneider shows how Matisse wrung a number of his most important pictures from his wife's face—the *Hat* and *Green Line* of 1905, the *Portrait* of 1912—and deals in some fine passages with the way the artist's very intimacy with Amelie Matisse enabled him to transform her from the "femme d'intérieur" (homely woman) into the decorative woman, the icon of a new artistic age. Elderfield also sees a Madame Matisse work as very important, but his reading of the 1915 drawing is extremely peculiar. He says it is the most "explicitly

Cubist" of Matisse's drawings, because there is "an actual grid" on part of the face. This Elderfield calls an "arbitrary device." I don't know why a grid should be thought, per se, Cubist; and this isn't, in any event, an "arbitrary device." (Whatever an arbitrary device is—one of those modernist torture mechanisms, like Cézanne's "flat resistant plane"?) This "grid," residues of which you can see here and there from the hat down to the neck, is a veil attached to Madame Matisse's hat. The little flicks of circular crayon marks around the eyes, which Elderfield calls "unnerving sparks of matter that fly around the nose and the eyes in a miniature electrical storm of emotion," are bits of jet or lace on the veil. The misreading of this drawing is significant, I think, because it suggests a mind that's a bit closed to literal readings. Though Elderfield is reluctant to impose Cubism on Matisse, Cubism is on his mind.

Elderfield's extended treatment of Matisse in relation to Cubism is not surprising in a MOMA catalogue, for at the Modern they've always been cheering on the Cubist Matisse. The big room at MOMA that holds Matisse's work from 1910 to 1920 comprises both one of the most important and one of the most misleading collections of Matisse paintings imaginable. By presenting only the reductive aspects of this great decade in Matisse's career, MOMA gives the sense of an imminent dissolution or breakup of the objects. At MOMA you cannot see how many of the most reductive images of the decade were mirrored by related paintings with a far more fully worked-up illusion. In a collection as carefully shaped as the Modern's, you can be sure this represents taste, and not the vagaries of acquisition. And given this taste for the non-illusionistic, it's no wonder that MOMA bows out when the focus of Matisse's work switches in the 1920s. This is when he begins to play out Schneider's dialectic between the secular and the sacred from the side of illusion (secular) rather than, as in the 1910s, from the side of reduction (sacred). Picasso's neo-classical figures are acceptable at the Modern because breakup is the rule with Picasso

in the neo-classicism of the 1920s as in the Cubism of the 1910s. Since Matisse's work of the Twenties underlines his consistent refusal to break the object and the space, he's suppressed, only to return again with the paper cutouts, which the Modern can again pretend are the result of a Cubist breakup.

The 1920s is the period in Matisse's career that always gets people's backs up. Matisse was perhaps never the most likable of men. Profoundly self-absorbed, he was the kind of egotist who doesn't bother to smooth things over with people. In the early years his wife made the children keep quiet during meals, so as not to disturb his concentration; in his later years he seemed no more inclined to accept the normal give and take of life. Some of the remarks he made to the Dominicans during the time he was working on the Chapel at Vence—about doing it “the same way I'd do something pagan,” etc.—may have been half-humorous or come from the bottom of his heart, but were calculated to keep the Dominicans at arm's length. After World War I Matisse, who was fifty at the end of 1919, ceased to paint his wife and family. His base of operation moved to the sun-struck South and he took up with a succession of lovely young models, about whom he said shocking things, such as, “I often keep these girls for years, until the interest is exhausted.” In 1940 he and Madame Matisse were legally separated.

It is interesting that when Matisse set out to do one of his first extended series of studies of a young girl model he put her in a hat—the Plumed Hat—that he designed himself. Madame Matisse had been a milliner, and Matisse had often painted her in hats probably of her own design. To put a young girl in a hat of *his* design would seem to exclude Madame Matisse completely: he becomes not only the father-lover but the mother-provider. Picasso may have had a far more well-publicized love life than Matisse, but Picasso had a way of making his various lovers shine like the sun and the stars—they light up the world. Matisse's attitude toward his women is, frankly, a bit icky. They're

all just aspects of his desire. Matisse—not Picasso—is the painter of male mid-life crisis.

Looking at the work of the 1920s, critics can't seem to help moralizing. A similar brand of criticism led one writer to voice distress at the sight of a small child at the Balthus show last spring, as if the sexual turn-on designed to satisfy every appetite hadn't been an essential ingredient in art collections from Hellenistic times on. People feel uplifted when Matisse paints his wife; when he paints some young beauty who he can wind around his finger, the flag of emotional emptiness is raised.

Elderfield takes a somewhat different tack. “Overtly erotic art,” he explains, “is inescapably illustrative and therefore intrudes something between form and subject—its appeal to lustfulness—so that our interest does not (to use a well-tried expression [?]) terminate in the work of art itself.” What this means, I guess, is that we mustn't actually get turned on by the work—that would only happen if it were bad art. According to Elderfield, the truth is that Matisse's women aren't sex objects, since Matisse has convinced us “they live . . . in a pastoral garden, with a wall around it, like paradise.” In other words, the artist can't touch—nor can we. Elderfield's argument here is elegant. In the way he shunts off the “appeal to lustfulness,” Elderfield is a real MOMA modernist, though his views don't have the confident flow they would have had ten or twenty years ago. The “overtly erotic,” the “inescapably illustrative”—present in Titian, Cranach, Caravaggio, and countless others—seem to be wearing the theory down. Elderfield feels the need to come to terms with our messy, extra-pictorial reactions, but he's really walling off elements of our experience, one from another (the wall image he uses is telling).

Classic modernist thought—Kandinsky's and Mondrian's writings, for instance—was rather intolerant of cut-and-dried interpretation, for the moderns saw that the old dialectic between plastic form and human experience was trickier than the academics had ever dreamed it could be. Postmodernist

aesthetics—of which Elderfield's essay is an interesting example—has mistakenly taken the modernist rebellion against iconography for a rebellion against meaning. Iconography the moderns were right to throw off; it was dead as a doornail in 1890. But the great modernists never said art was about making art; they knew a work of art that was strictly about itself couldn't interest anyone. They also knew meanings couldn't be reduced to words. But now, the postmoderns have come along and mistaken the absence of words for an absence of meaning. Elderfield's book might be called an attempt to create an iconography of the experiential, which is a likable but probably impossible task, since iconography isn't feeling but a blueprint against which feeling is played out. The great moderns knew this, and surely they wanted to free feeling from pat, limited interpretations: think how many of them were crazy for mysticism. There's an element almost of raunchiness in some of the Matisse drawings—especially in those pen-and-inks from 1935—that's intended, I think, to get viewers all hot and bothered. This element in the work touches a part of our being, just as Brancusi's lucidity touches another part of us. The half-covered bodies and firm breasts of *Odalisque with Tabouret* (1928) and *La Persane* (1929) and the nipples and thighs of the pen-and-ink nudes of 1935 are surely meant as a turn-on. There's nothing un-modernist about this. A turn-on is an emotion, *very* but not *entirely* different from the euphoria we feel when we look at the harmony of rectangles in a Mondrian. Both are human responses to the implications of form, and in both cases our emotions are shaped, deepened by the quality of the form. A photograph from one of those semi-pornographic magazines of the turn of the century was the initial inspiration for Matisse's sculpture *La Serpentine* (1909); I don't doubt Matisse later had it sometimes in mind to get into his drawings a bit of the savory sex kitsch of girlie magazines.

Schneider is one of the very few writers who has done justice to the Matisse of the 1920s. His discussion of the battle between

volume and decoration in a masterpiece of the decade, *Decorative Figure on an Ornamental Background* (1925), is exemplary. Schneider says that in the 1920s Matisse "wanted two-dimensional space to create effects which had so far been produced by three-dimensional space. It was no longer a question of skillfully combining realism with abstraction, but of getting abstraction to simulate realism." This seems to me a most convincing description of the idea of neo-classicism in early 1920s art. Schneider sees the color in these paintings as a cacophony that expresses the irrationality of color in nature—he says it's like an armful of flowers freshly plucked from the garden. "Every rule governing the use of color is broken. The only law in these paintings is that of the impossible, the unpredictable, a freedom of association bordering on anarchy with, it may be added, no precedent or equivalent in the history of painting. There is nothing color shrinks from doing in Matisse's work of the Twenties. There is something monstrous about its splendor—its glorious incompatibilities—something beyond all human scale, like the splendor of natural forces." The Matisse of these 1920s works has every bit as robust a sense of his art as the man of a decade earlier. The *Moorish Screen* (1921-22) in the Philadelphia Museum of Art is a very different thing from *Dance* and *Music*; I'm not convinced it's a lesser achievement.

The Matisse of the 1920s is a poet of illusions, as is the Picasso of *The Three Musicians* (1921). Schneider quotes Matisse as commenting, in 1941, of the hotels he'd lived in off and on since the 1920s, that they were "fake, absurd, terrific, delicious." Matisse's delectation in the rococo-revival kitsch of the Riviera here sounds a bit like the Surrealists' passion for the kitsch of bourgeois Paris—found in Aragon's novel *Le Paysan de Paris* (1924-25), for example. The harems and odalisques of the 1920s are fakes, but who says Matisse was under any illusions about them? If Matisse loved Renoir's late nudes so much—those resurrections of the classical humanist nude—why didn't he

paint something more like that? The answer is that he couldn't at that time. Like De Chirico's dressmaker's dummies of some years earlier, Matisse's young girls posing amidst the leftovers of an Eastern bazaar were all that was still possible. Both neo-classicism and Surrealism were reactions to high modernism, rebellions against purity. Matisse's 1920s are about too much and not enough, about excess and emptiness. They depict a world drunk on artificiality. Baudelaire's line—"Glorify the cult of images, my only, my unique, my primitive passion"—is a key to the Surrealism of the 1920s. It might unlock Matisse's 1920s as well.

No modern artist worked directly from the model with such intensity and such varied and extraordinary results as Matisse. Though there are some splendid still lifes and landscapes in the retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, the figure is the thing. In his drawings Matisse is always finding new ways to describe the amplitude of the human form. His strokes don't separate things out the way Picasso's do. Matisse caresses the form, and achieves—from the evidence of the MOMA retrospective, which is almost completely black and white—a surprising range of colors. There are the watery black lines of the Fauve-period ink drawings; the silvery gray crayon lines of the portraits of the mid-1910s; the hair-thin silverpoint-colored strokes of the 1919 pencil works. The tones of the 1920s drawings done with charcoal and estompe are plangent. (Estompe is a pencil-shaped tool, made of felt or leather, used to smear or blend the charcoal.) The erased and re-drawn charcoals of the 1930s feel luxuriant, with a plushy range from velvet to blackest black. From the first really major drawings—the ink nudes of 1906—through the drawings of the 1930s like *Young Woman in a "Fishnet" Dress*, Matisse's form sense keeps asserting itself in new ways. The rightness of placement—the way figures stay toward the center or reach out in great arcs toward the edges—conveys a fullness of utterance, a quality like deep, satisfying breathing.

Matisse enjoys being led on by whatever medium he happens to be using. He isn't exactly a pure virtuoso draftsman, because he's always learning more about how a pencil or a stick of charcoal can act. The medium is never completely bent to the artist's will, as it is in Picasso's drawings. Picasso makes you feel it's all a breeze; with Matisse you can almost hear the mind running: "Now what can this pen and this ink do on this piece of paper?"

Though Matisse did strong drawings to the end of his life, in the 1940s his command as a draftsman wavered. In 1941 he produced a series of groups of drawings called "Theme and Variations," which signaled a dramatic change in procedure. In each group a worked-up charcoal, done from the model, is followed by a spate of fast ink or crayon drawings, executed almost in a trance. Matisse, who loved to give interviews, talked quite a bit about the theory of these drawings, and one gets the uncomfortable feeling here that for once the theory is preceding the images. The images in the "Theme and Variations" series are all too much about drawing; they're the first really dangerously self-involved work Matisse has done. Matisse made the fatal error of feeling he had no more to learn as a draftsman and could now just produce: these drawings, long on bravura, are produced not by a man but by a drawing machine.

The 1948 brush-and-ink drawings of still lifes and interiors suggest a return to strength. I remember looking at them as a kid in the late 1950s and thinking they were the ultimate—real highbrow art. They do have an impressive originality, a scale and rhythm unlike anything ever done. The stage seems set for a final major statement in black and white, but Matisse won't let the elements take on a life of their own. Matisse's bold strokes of ink are reminiscent of the effects of oriental calligraphy. One wants these images to have the buoyancy of painted scrolls, but there's something monolithic about their too-black blacks and blah-feeling whites. They're brilliant, inert set pieces. Certain 1940s oils

of interiors—the *Large Red Interior*, for instance—have more intriguing internal rhythms, more tension. By the 1940s conventional drawing was probably inadequate to fulfill Matisse's impulses as an inventor of lines. During the 1940s his energy re-focused on the new medium of the paper cutout—which he called drawing with scissors. It's as if Matisse's lines, which since the 1910s had been lapping against the edges of the page, now rise off the page and free themselves from drawing. A few paper cutouts were, rightly, included in the Matisse drawing show. After one was done looking at the drawings, it was nice to go upstairs to the permanent collection and see two of the last and greatest: *The Swimming Pool* and *Souvenir of Oceania*.

Schneider has a fascinating chapter on Matisse's interest in Michelangelo; I'm tempted to say that at least in this area he's just scratched the surface. In their late work—Matisse's paper cutouts, Michelangelo's architecture—both of these transcendent figure artists abandon the physical side of life in favor of the spirituality of pure, non-figurative form. Matisse's life span (1869-1954) has curious similarities with Michelangelo's (1475-1564). Both artists were born in the last quarter of a great century of artistic change. Both arrived on the crest of a tidal wave: Renaissance Florence, modernist Paris. Both achieved, just after the turn of their century, the classic statement of a high style: high modernism in Fauvism (1905) and the *Dance* (1909); High Renaissance in the *David* (finished in 1504) and the Sistine Ceiling (1508-1512). After that, Matisse and Michelangelo each went through a process of unwinding, of falling out of the classical style and into what is often called (at least in Michelangelo's case) Mannerism. It's curious that the affinities between Matisse and Michelangelo that Schneider points to are mostly between the Matisse of the 1920s and 1930s and the Michelangelo of the *Medici Chapel* (1524-34). There is

here a distinct similarity in emotional coloring: the ambivalence of passion touched with longing and melancholy is expressed through an over-aestheticization of the figure. In the *Lorenzo and Giuliano of the Medici Chapel* you have male gorgeousness gone too far, into a hyper-beauty not unlike certain odalisques of Matisse's 1920s. They have the same blank eyes. In the fourth decade of their centuries both artists transformed the figure from a thing of grace into a thing of terrifying weight: see the *Barnes Dance* (1931-32) and the *Last Judgement* (1534-41). Finally, in the paper cutouts of the 1940s and early 1950s and in Michelangelo's designs for St. Peter's (1546-64), figuration is transcended. Michelangelo's colossal pilasters, like the forms in Matisse's *Swimming Pool*, go beyond all bounds; both artists break with the standards of the age into which they were born.

In the last paper cutouts Matisse is revealed as the hero of Schneider's book: the man who stayed longest with nature and was then able to go furthest beyond traditional art. No other figure of the heroic age of modern art (not Picasso, not Mondrian) managed—or even cared—to transcend easel painting. (Pollock and Newman remained easel painters as well.) Most everything in modernism resolves back into the classic framed moment of Western art. Matisse is the exception. In the last paper cutouts he crosses barriers: from painting into decoration, from time into timelessness. His great curves—the glory of his draftsmanship—float free, beyond the bounds of form and space. Matisse, the man who lived in hotel suites, breaks camp. Pierre Schneider has been criticized for his addiction to quotations from literature and philosophy. His taste, though, is impeccable. What better epigraph could one find for the paper cutouts than Schneider's lines from Goethe:

I have built my home on nothing
And so the whole world belongs to me.

The real crisis in the humanities today

by Norman Cantor

The study of the humanities is nowadays praised by every foundation president, university chancellor, and federal secretary of education as the academic and intellectual bulwark of our civilization. To listen to their pronouncements, one would think that the only problems affecting the humanities today are to be found in the amount of federal funding that should be allocated to the campus for education in the humanities and the kind of curriculum that can best serve to make their importance apparent to college students. But there is another, deeper, more complicated, and more interesting issue affecting the humanities today—a debate that is important for the campus now and for American culture as a whole in the closing years of the twentieth century. This is an issue that will determine how we and our children and grandchildren view the past, read a work of literature, listen to music, look at paintings and sculpture, and perceive our culture in relation to that of the Third World. These are not small matters. They go to the heart of our cultural and political life. What is happening is that the dominance once enjoyed by liberal humanism is rapidly declining, and new ideologies have risen to a position of influence and power in the academic world. The self-confidence and creativity that characterized liberal humanists in the early 1960s, the period of their zenith on the American academic scene, is fast eroding, and something else—an intellectual movement not yet defined—is taking their place.

For a number of reasons, I regard myself as typical of the rising generation of academic humanists of the early 1960s. First, this species was almost exclusively male. (Women were less welcome on faculties in 1960 than they were in 1925.) Second, the rising humanists of my generation came from the middle class, for whom academic careers in the humanities had become respectable and attractive. Middle-class self-confidence, ambition, and persistent interest in status and money were thereby imported into the hitherto genteel, shabby, and passive atmosphere of the academic profession. By 1970, as the profession prospered during the era of generous federal and state support, the public image of the successful academic humanist had become that of an entrepreneurial, outgoing, and affluent person. Third, humanists of my generation were as often as not ethnically (although not religiously) Jewish, or they stemmed from some other white ethnic group—such as Italian Catholic—that had hitherto been almost entirely excluded from humanities departments in major universities.

Male, ambitiously middle class, frequently non-WASP—this was the social profile of the major humanities departments in the heyday of university expansion and academic prosperity, from about 1958 to about 1975. The sociological dimension was reflected in the ideological perspective of the leading humanists of the period—the perspective of cultural liberalism.

Whatever discipline they were trained in—literature, history, etc.—liberal humanists had a recognizable way of looking at the world, and they profoundly influenced their students in adopting this outlook. They were historicists and universalists. They drew upon the traditions of nineteenth-century romanticism to develop a strong historical orientation in whatever fields they entered. The nature of things was explained by how things had developed.

Liberal humanists, moreover, were enamored of erudition. They believed in the value of knowledge, in the utility of research; they loved libraries, they devoured books, they were deeply moved by learned footnotes. They regarded bibliographies as immensely important and valuable.

This learning was somehow made relevant to the present. Liberal humanists were not antiquarians. They believed in the separate existence of the past at the same time that they believed in the relevance of the past to modern life and thought. They sought to appropriate tradition for use in contemporary culture and society. Whether this belief in the identity of the past and its relevance to the present was really tenable was always debatable, but liberal humanists certainly defended it.

Liberal humanists were at once elitist and egalitarian. In society at large they favored the Democrats' welfare state. They wanted education to be a vehicle of both enlightenment and social mobility. Inside the university, they tried hard to open up the humanist profession to talent—they were early advocates of opportunities for blacks and women, although they were not free from a patronizing attitude toward these groups.

At first liberal humanists welcomed the idea of affirmative action. But when the implications of affirmative action for Jewish and other white ethnic groups became evident, their ranks split. Many became less egalitarian and moved to the ranks of the academic conservatives. The career of Oscar Handlin, the Harvard historian, is a case study. In 1960 he would have ranked high on anyone's list of academic liberals; by

the mid-1970s he would have ranked high on anyone's list of academic conservatives.

Beyond ideological concerns, there was a certain style of thought and expression that characterized liberal humanists. Their style was one of generalizing and blending. Generalizing: making general propositions about particular aspects of human consciousness and behavior. Blending: integrating seemingly disparate facets of human consciousness and behavior in order to form an immensely rich cultural synthesis. Thus, liberal humanists consciously eroded the boundaries between disciplines. It was as if their vaunting self-confidence impelled them to pronounce on anything that came to their attention. At bottom, liberal humanists were inclined to be splendid amateurs.

In the late Sixties and early Seventies there was a strong phenomenological tendency among the liberal humanists. They were inclined to view the world through the consciousness of one person or a small group of people. This perspective was the last important contribution of the liberal humanists to the humanities. For them, the past was to be appropriated for the exploration of consciousness. Biography, rather than sociology, became their favorite vehicle. The examination of the ego, with or without the help of Freudian analysis, was their intense concern. The existential struggle of an individual mind, whether the author's own or someone else's, was the key to the illumination of reality.

We shall not again see such scholars on the American scene. They have been replaced by very different people, people who do not share the values of liberal humanism. Whatever the specifics of their ideologies, this new breed shares a faith in the authenticity and power of systems as opposed to the consciousness and values of the individual. They believe that the individual is imbedded in a cultural, intellectual, moral structure, and that he is the end product, the object of the system that animates it. In their view, the individual cannot claim a separate identity and private value outside this system. An

immediate consequence of this ideological dogma for the reading of literature and interpretation of art is that a literary or artistic work is always understood in relation to some group consciousness, never in terms of the feelings and consciousness of an individual artist or writer. Thus, every novel is regarded as an expression of class (nearly always bourgeois) or group mentality; and every painting or musical composition is depersonalized, transformed into a representation or manifestation of an aspect of the objective social system. Against this critical approach, liberal humanism has been fighting a losing battle.

A set of social circumstances has contributed to this change. First, the economic decline of the academic professions has made the humanities unattractive to the middle class and their progeny. The brightest white ethnic college graduates are now heading for law school or business school rather than seeking Ph.D.'s in the humanities. The pool of first-rate minds entering doctoral programs in the humanities has shrunk dramatically in the last ten years.

Second, affirmative action has given WASP females the strong position that male Jews and other white ethnic groups enjoyed in the Sixties. More often than not, a WASP woman now triumphs in the equal opportunity procedure by which universities staff their entry level positions. Thus, slowly but steadily in the major humanities departments WASP women are taking over leadership positions from liberal humanists of the older generations.

Third, liberal humanism has suffered the fate of the political liberalism with which it has been so closely involved. Instead of acting as the critical force behind political liberalism, liberal humanism became in the Seventies the happy beneficiary of liberalism's patronage. When liberalism demonstrated its incapacity to deal with world power alignments and a changing technology and economy—and when it lost the White House to Ronald Reagan—liberal humanists suffered in terms of both social reputation and patronage.

There are today three movements at work in American humanities departments which have replaced, or will soon replace, the ethos of the liberal humanists of my generation. These are Marxism, feminism, and the methodologies of structuralism and deconstruction. It is to these three movements and their ideological implications that we must turn for a real understanding of the crisis in the humanities today.

When I was a graduate student at Princeton in the early Fifties one of my fellow students turned out to be a Marxist. He was forced to leave. We have come a long way since then, for better or worse.

Of the two major intellectual movements of the first two-thirds of the twentieth century—Freudianism and Marxism—the former had little representation in American universities before 1950 and the latter almost none, at least publicly. The great transformation in academic attitudes toward Marxism occurred in the 1960s. This was due, in part, to the campus atmosphere engendered by liberal humanism itself, and also to the New Left's political penetration of American campuses in the late 1960s. It was conspicuously marked by the appointment of Lawrence Stone to a senior chair in history at Princeton and by the accession of Eugene Genovese to the chairmanship of the history department at the University of Rochester. Stone was—and is—an English Marxist, ideologically the disciple of the great English socialist historian R. H. Tawney. Genovese had made himself politically unacceptable at Rutgers earlier in the Sixties for his opposition to the Vietnam War. Before going to Rochester he had taken refuge for a time at a university in Canada.

Both men were regarded by their peers as scholars of high distinction. Their appointments demonstrated that Marxism was now academically respectable, and that leftist scholars were to be entrusted with dominant positions. Stone came to head an institute at Princeton—the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies—which gave him extensive patronage powers in the historical profession. Similarly, Genovese's appoint-

ment at Rochester gave him an influential position in the academic establishment.

It has been said that the New Left movement of the Sixties ultimately failed. Perhaps it did fail on the political scene, but it cannot be said to have failed within the university. Because many graduate students in the Sixties and Seventies were sympathetic—or wholly committed—to Marxist ideas, Marxists now comprise influential groups in many humanities departments, and their numbers increase annually since they are well represented among new Ph.D.'s.

Among Marxist scholars there has been an inevitable split between the traditional Marxist-Leninists and the more humanistic, liberal, or "Western" Marxists. This second group derives its thought largely from the Frankfurt School of the 1920s and 1930s—the school of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno—as well as from the writings of Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci. The books of these thinkers, patiently edited and translated during the past two decades, have become the basic texts for Western, as distinct from Leninist, Marxism. "Critical theory," as this outlook is called, is now an integral part of the American university curriculum. Adorno is hailed today as one of the more important social theorists and cultural critics of this century. Adorno's disciple Jürgen Habermas is also taken very seriously these days, not only in university sociology departments but in humanities departments as well. Like Adorno and other members of the Frankfurt School, Habermas believes that "social systems are life-worlds that are symbolically structured." In his view, the crisis of late capitalism—which is assumed to characterize the present condition of civilization in the West—is as much a cultural and moral crisis as a social and economic one.

The materialist, later Marx may have stood the idealist system of Hegel on its head, but in the "humanistic" version of Marxism it has been possible, all the same, to reintroduce idealism into the Marxist system. This is what the so-called critical theorists have done. They believe—as Marxists

always have—that the material and technological infrastructure of society shapes the cultural superstructure; but in their view the cultural system does not remain fully subservient to the infrastructure, as it does in Leninist theory. For Marxists of this humanistic persuasion, culture can claim a conditioning "hegemony" of its own. The reification that capitalism is said to induce in cultural life does not preclude the existence of "constellated images" and "structural mystification"—terms which mean everything from highly abstract and complex artistic forms to what we now call lifestyle and media events. To a greater or lesser degree these cultural structures are believed to act back upon other dimensions of the social system (here is where there is a lot of room for hermeneutics); they acquire a mediating force. From this analysis it follows that studies of culture are as important to this kind of Marxist outlook as studies of economy and social structure. The question, "Can the socialist revolution take the form of a cultural revolution?" becomes a paramount consideration.

The principle of cultural mediation—the recognition that culture is not perpetually an instrument of material or economic forces but is itself a decisive mediating factor in society—is the central tenet of humanistic Marxism. Indeed, it is precisely this doctrine that has been used to make the new academic Marxism acceptable to humanities faculties.

Among the most prominent Marxist humanist scholars in America today are Martin Jay, Mark Poster, Eugene Lunn, and Frederic Jameson—all, until recently, at the University of California. (Jameson has now gone to Duke University in North Carolina.) Their work in intellectual history or literary criticism has taken the place, for many bright students in the humanities, of the liberal-humanist scholarship that characterized the 1960s. There are several journals (*Social Text*, *October*, and *Telos*) that regularly dwell on humanist-Marxist issues—the extent of their differences with Leninist-Marxism, their application to various fields

of criticism, and their usefulness in analyzing current political affairs.

Recently there has been an effort to integrate this humanistic Marxism with the structuralist and deconstructionist theories so popular today. What might be called the avant-garde in the humanities is now devoted to this task of integration. It sometimes also finds a place in its program for the radical Freudianism of Wilhelm Reich, Herbert Marcuse, and R.D. Laing. The writings of Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser are increasingly influential in shaping a coherent doctrine out of these sources. Lacan and Althusser are seen by the younger generation of Western Marxists as intellectual liberators. Lacan is regarded as having eliminated the ego from Freud's paradigm of the psyche; he believes that the unconscious is structured like a language and is therefore susceptible to close analysis. Althusser dissociates superstructure and infrastructure in Marxist analysis; he makes ideology self-referential and not something provable or refutable by empirical data. (If you want to believe in Stalinism, for example, there is no historical impedance.) A humanist education today in the later twentieth century requires a familiarity with this mode of thought.

One of the most important centers of Marxist thought in this country is the Fernand Braudel Center at the State University of New York at Binghamton. The Center is named for the French historian whose social histories and critiques of capitalism are so much the vogue these days. It is headed by Immanuel Wallerstein and Terence Hopkins, both products of the sociology department at Columbia in the Sixties who left there after a disagreement with the Columbia administration concerning the resolution of the student rebellion of May, 1968.

The Braudel Center, although its budget is really quite modest, has accomplished much more—politically as well as intellectually—than many large humanities departments at major universities. Terence Hopkins is attempting to modernize Marxist

theory in the context of Mertonian sociology, that is, in the context of mainstream academic sociology in the tradition of Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons. Immanuel Wallerstein is elaborating a scheme of universal history that builds upon conventional Latin American dependency theory—the view that the Third World has constituted a perpetual marginal economic dependency exploited for the wealth and development of the Western capitalist core. Under the aegis of Wallerstein, the Braudel Center has established affiliations with Marxist movements, including political movements, in many Third World countries.

So far, the Marxist humanistic program in the universities has concentrated on criticism, social history, and the history of Marxist thought itself. It has nevertheless failed to develop a distinctive, persuasive critique of American culture comparable to the work of Adorno and Benjamin in the 1930s in the European context. The Marxist penetration of the universities has also created pedagogical problems: there is a particularly blatant kind of young academic now who tries to politicize everything on the campus, including his or her own classes. Marxist ideology in the classroom is more prejudiced and militant than the liberal or conservative doctrines of an earlier generation, doubtless because its goal remains revolution, not incremental democratic change.

Marxism, in both its hard-core Leninist form and its humanist Western or liberal variety, has provided the most intellectually active cultural context for the propagation of feminist theory, the second of the movements which are transforming the study of the humanities today.

Feminist theory has often followed liberal lines—it is said, for example, that women are of equal capacity as men and hence have a natural and constitutional right to equal opportunity. Accordingly Western history has been rewritten by liberal feminists to divest it of patriarchal privilege and to rescue from oblivion thousands of female writers, artists, and activists. But feminist

theory has also at times used a biological argument analogous to a social Darwinism that was long ago condemned by liberal humanists. In its feminist form, this ideology contends that biology is destiny—that women are biologically different from men and hence psychologically and culturally different as well. According to this doctrine, women should be seen as a distinct species with particular needs. The claim is also sometimes made that women are superior to men. This is a social Darwinist variant of white male chauvinism stood on its head.

For feminist militants who envision themselves in revolt against the traditional order these arguments are discomfiting. They seem to make feminists the collaborators with certain rightist elements, and they legitimize debates that moral empiricists prefer not to hold. If biology in the form of gender is the determinant of woman's destiny and the sanction for the social claims to fulfill that destiny, then why is not biology in the form of skin color a basis for rights and power in South Africa and other places? The nineteenth-century social Darwinists, from L. H. Morgan to Herbert Spencer, were neither fools nor proto-Nazis; they were dedicated social scientists. Yet by mixing biology with sociology and seeking large-scale conclusions from fragmentary and confusing data, they set in motion terrible things. The recent efforts of sociobiologists to resurrect the coupling of the two disciplines has been welcomed by few outside their own coterie. Thus severe obstacles resist the yearning of militant feminists to raise again the awesome claim that biology is destiny. Whatever the sociological truth of this proposition, it is an intellectual road best not taken.

This leaves radical or Marxist feminism as the most energetic variety of feminist ideology. Radical feminism comes in at least two varieties: the first is the Leninist kind, which places women of appropriate consciousness in solidarity with workers, the poor, minorities, and the Third World in a popular front against what is characterized as white male chauvinist imperialism. The second kind of

radical feminism is associated with humanistic Marxism. While not denying the general validity of the Leninist model, it devotes immediate attention to the cultural and institutional contexts in which women live and work, and it examines the cultural forces that impinge on women's consciousness.

Much of the research and a significant share of the teaching in women's studies programs depends for its ideological assumptions on this integration of humanistic Marxism and feminist analysis. Women's studies programs in the universities are characteristically headed by a relatively recent Ph.D. in history, literature, or sociology who believes strongly in the articulation of feminist theory in humanistic Marxist terms. Many of the scholarly monographs and articles that fall within the boundaries of women's studies—and that support a scholar's candidacy for tenure—rest on this Marxist foundation. Interestingly, the incorporation of feminism into Marxist theory does not appear to be a subject of great appeal to male Marxists of either the traditional or more humanistic kind. This raises the question of how long Marxist radical feminism will dominate women's studies programs; it also raises the more basic question of how long feminism will remain a component of radical intellectual life.

The third cultural movement in the American humanities today is the one which centers on structuralism and deconstruction. These theories have captured many centers of patronage and influence in the academic profession. Indeed, they are virtually assured a strong representation at Yale, Cornell, Columbia, Berkeley, Johns Hopkins, and other major universities for at least another twenty years.

All that it takes for the critical point to be reached in the ascent of a humanist ideology is for a couple of energetic and highly visible tenured professors in each of two or three major graduate schools to establish their authority. Nowadays, when the pool of superior doctoral students has sharply diminished (perhaps for reasons associated with

the decline of liberal humanism), the impact of a new ideology on the humanist professions, disseminated by recent Ph.D.'s, can occur more rapidly than it did in the 1960s, when there were relatively large numbers of young scholars at the academic entry level who came from a broad array of doctoral programs. The impoverishment of the humanities profession has made easier an intellectual revolution within it.

Of course the new cultural movement, like all such movements, has differences and contradictions within its ranks. It could be said that structuralism and deconstruction are saying virtually opposing things, that the former is integrative, the latter disintegrative. Yet structuralism and deconstruction belong to the same intellectual world, the same universe of discourse, not only because they originated in the same place, the University of Paris, but because they use the same language (partly derived from the linguistic system of Ferdinand de Saussure) and talk to the same audience. Structuralism and deconstruction are part of the same effort to establish a post-liberal, post-Marxist culture and ideology.

Structuralism and deconstruction are in fact similar modes of reductionism. No longer satisfied with the Marxist reduction of social and cultural reality to material forces (and feeling that this kind of Victorian materialism has been superseded by critical theory), the champions of structuralism and deconstruction have adumbrated their own critical systems. Both of these systems are synchronic—that is, they are anti-historicist in their outlook. Both aim at eliminating a consideration of the individual and of personal consciousness in favor of all-inclusive, “objective” systems. Both attribute importance to codes operating in the unconscious. As for the Western traditions of liberal humanism, neither structuralism nor deconstruction finds much of anything in them to revere or sustain. The Third World, on the other hand, is held to be admirable for the “thickness” of its texture.

Structuralism's worldview is precisely that of “thick texture.” It posits a macrocosmic

mental-social system that embraces everything and everyone. As A. J. Ayer has pointed out, structuralism is a kind of neo-idealism. It attempts to detect the underlying forms of social arrangements and to trace those structures to the structure of the mind itself. Its roots reach back to the revived interest in Hegel at French universities in the 1930s. The French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss is structuralism's most famous proponent. His temperament and purpose are close to those of the existentialists, but in his doctrine authenticity shifts from the existentialist ego to a holistic structure. Structuralism thereby claims to supersede liberal humanism in favor of a behavioral, scientifically verifiable system which operates irrespective of individual heroism. Lévi-Strauss's ethnographic and linguistic data demonstrated to him that this system featured a binary code.

Lévi-Strauss did not receive great popular attention outside his discipline, anthropology, until the late Sixties. Then he rapidly gained a wide audience, largely because of an effort on the part of French humanistic thinkers to find an idealistic substitute for the Marxist, materialist form of reductionism. Marxism, particularly in the Leninist form that prevailed in Paris in the Sixties, was rapidly becoming wearisome or worse. But French thinkers were used to reductionism—it was, so to speak, their *métier*—and hence they fastened on to the idealistic reductionism of Lévi-Strauss.

When structuralism first became visible on the American intellectual scene—in the issue of *Yale French Studies* devoted to it in 1969, for example—it was Lévi-Strauss's philosophical idealism that seemed most important. This made structuralism's migration to America in the early Seventies much easier. It appeared to be an idealistic, integrative, behaviorially based kind of thinking; it insisted, for example, on the universality of cognitive categories, and of mental and social structures. To this extent structuralism seemed to fit with liberal humanism, which was at its most creative phase in the early Seventies. In the long run, however,

this aspect of structuralism did not prevail. Lévi-Strauss's admiration for Third World spontaneity and authenticity (where its cultures were said not to have been devastated by colonialism) gave a leftist quality to his work, and to the work of his followers. And this quality, in the late Seventies and Eighties, pulled structuralism in the direction of an alliance with humanistic Marxism.

Deconstruction arose in the context of the structuralist mode of thought. In origin it represented a critique of, and to some extent a dissent from, structuralism. Over time the two movements have overlapped, or at least fused at the margin, and now one thinks of them as the two wings of a single cultural movement. Deconstruction questioned the integrative, idealistic qualities of structuralism and—more fundamentally—of liberal humanism. The deconstructionists fastened upon Lévi-Strauss's reductionism, discovering beneath language itself certain binary oppositions that were said to act upon one another and “deconstruct” a text. The deconstructionists thus raised the issue of whether language incessantly operates within all texts and all cultures to deconstruct prevailing assumptions and codes. As a deconstructionist peels away the surface meaning of a “text,” he reveals a subtext which contains alternate—and opposite—meanings. Further layers of “subtext” eventually pass from the realm of the conscious to that of the unconscious. Of course language is not the only object of such analysis. Institutions of political and social power come under scrutiny as well. Close consideration reveals the inward collapse of their moral legitimacy and hence of their claim to domination.

As Richard Rorty has suggested, there is in deconstruction some of that radical propensity to scrutinize legitimizing traditions and propositions that characterized early twentieth-century pragmatism. Yet American pragmatism presupposed an optimistic confidence in liberal democracy and sought to use its logic and epistemology as instruments for advancing toward a more progressive society. There is no such affinity for

liberal democracy among the deconstructionists; they are much closer to political nihilism than to the progressivism of John Dewey.

Deconstruction as expressed by Jacques Derrida, the French linguist and philosopher, is a kind of radical, socially destabilizing, politically upsetting consciousness. It brings sharply into question the stability and shape of the humanities as they have been commonly known and taught since the Second World War under the liberal aegis. It is antithetical to the concept of the humanities as an integrative core in education and middle-class culture, and as a pedagogically communicable set of texts with well-defined meanings and widely appreciated values. Finally, it is antithetical to cultural liberalism itself. Derrida's doctrine that every text deconstructs itself, and that behind every text lie subtexts, strikes at the heart of cultural liberalism, with its penchant for determining the fixed meaning and general significance of every text. Cultural liberalism finds a coherent pattern in any text and places the text in a defined historical order. Deconstruction seeks to demolish all this.

Michel Foucault, the prominent French philosopher who died last year, was both a deconstructionist and a structuralist. He was a deconstructionist in the way he divested social institutions of all moral sanction. He was a structuralist in his attempt to set down “archaeological” shafts into past culture, revealing the institutional and ethical layers that power was alleged to have created at specific historical moments. Foucault was a disillusioned Marxist. He was a humanistic Marxist who had absorbed all the radical thinking, all the left-wing formulations, of the twentieth century and compared them with the behavior of the Left and come to the conclusion that there was morality nowhere. He was the final outcome in left-wing thought of the revelation of the Stalinist holocaust, which convinced French intellectuals only in the 1960s. No longer could the Gulag Archipelago be attributed to the disinformation of the CIA.

Foucault's culture is a culture of political despair. He sees only a struggle for power, a manipulation of ideas and ethical values by all groups of society through all moments of time, including the present. Instruments of humanitarian progress like the asylum and penitentiary are perceived as the vehicles of group and class power. Even socialism is unable to provide an escape from this iron law of history. Nothing is more perversely brilliant in Foucault than the passage in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* where he categorizes the manipulative power grabs of those we have been taught to call heroes, those who fought for sexual freedom in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Foucault's homosexual disposition specifically contributed to his independent, critical view of sexual liberation movements, and more generally to his rejection and criticism of reforming traditions.

The debt of Foucault, and to a lesser extent Derrida, to Nietzsche is frequently noted. But their Nietzsche is a Nietzsche without the idea of some transcendent time or place. Similarly, Foucault's cultural archaeology of the asylum and the penitentiary resembles a leading facet of liberal historiography, which cultivated relativism and delighted in the subtle criticism that showed the advantages that accrued to some groups even from ostensibly principled reform. Yet there was always a reserve clause in liberal relativism. Finally there had to be recognition that there were good people and noble ideas in the world. There were, after all, superior individuals who committed their energies and capabilities to human betterment. Behind the dunes of Foucault's bleak landscape lurk no heroes, indeed no recognizable human beings: only the mutants engendered by oppressive social systems. Morality is eliminated by a despairing nihilism, an unlimited relativism; personal commitment, the last best hope of liberal historiography, is completely absorbed into the power system. High principle is only a vehicle for, or victim of, the forces of manipulative domination.

I remember way back in 1979 a farsighted dean pleading with the English Department of a major urban university to appoint a senior professor who could discuss the New New Criticism—Foucault, Derrida, et al.—rather than yet another editor of the minor works of Chaucer. The English faculty vociferously objected. But a couple of years later, afraid of being left behind by Yale and Columbia, the department appointed such a critic to a senior chair. Now he gives lectures on structuralism and deconstruction to standing-room-only crowds, and a third of his audience is made up of intellectuals from the city who feel that they must know what the structuralists and post-structuralists are talking about if they want to be current.

When a cultural revolution is under way, it advertises itself; it needs no publisher's cocktail party or honorary degrees. It becomes a mysterious, magnetic force. When I struggle to understand Berkeley medievalist Howard Bloch's structuralist interpretation of twelfth-century French literature, or when I open the pages of *Critical Inquiry*, founded at the University of Chicago in the tradition of neo-Aristotelianism, and find that its articles now owe a lot more to Derrida and Foucault than to Aquinas and Hutchins, I know that something very important is happening in American humanities departments.

Structuralism and post-structuralism, or deconstruction, is extremely intellectual, academic, bookish: it makes no concessions to the ordinary well-educated person. The college literature courses that are taught in this new mode often fail. It reminds me of thirteenth-century scholasticism or sixteenth-century Protestant humanism—highly intellectualized movements, extremely learned and academic, thoroughly university-centered, oblivious or contemptuous of popular traditions. They greatly affected the prevailing social order by abetting the replacement of one establishment by another, one system of power by another. Structuralism and deconstruction are similarly an attack on the old liberal order, replacing humanistic egoism with system and textuality.

Marxism is the ideology that at first sight should be least capable of integrating with structuralism and deconstruction. Structuralism is idealist; Marxism in its original form materialist. And Marxism's synthesizing, dialectical attitude appears to be the polar opposite of deconstruction's fragmentation. Yet a strenuous effort is underway in humanist Marxist circles to achieve an accommodation with structuralism and deconstruction, using Lukács, the Frankfurt School, and the American critic Kenneth Burke, as well as Lacan and Althusser, as inspirations, oracles, guides.

While Marxist-Leninism would never be able to achieve an intellectual accommodation with Lévi-Strauss's idealist structuralism, there is in humanistic Marxism sufficient idealism, and a sufficient willingness to distinguish semi-autonomous cultural codes, to make a Marxist structuralism possible. Deconstruction, for its part, offers a powerful contemporary instrument for critique of the middle-class liberal culture that Marxism seeks to displace. Humanistic Marxism has been more effective in historical scholarship than in criticism of contemporary culture; deconstruction provides a language, and, to a degree, a set of concepts, for pursuing the task. Hence the eagerness of humanistic Marxism to recast itself in deconstructionist terms. That this is a difficult undertaking can be seen in the pages of *October* and *Social Text*, two of the hardest reads in the humanities today. The obscurity reflects the intellectual difficulty of synthesizing Marxism with structuralism and deconstruction. Yet there is a powerful emotional impetus on the part of humanist Marxists to achieve such a synthesis, and in cultural history emotion can have as great an impact as intellect.

Marxism affects to hate bourgeois liberalism for its treatment of the poor and workers. Derrida's disciples disdain cultural liberalism for its misreading of texts. If we remember Lévi-Strauss's union of the structures of mind and society, these differing hostilities toward liberalism find common ground. Marxists and deconstructionists

have the common goal of establishing a post-bourgeois culture. For this task, the younger humanist Marxists find in structuralism and deconstruction the concepts and language to complete the work begun by Gramsci, Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and other founders of the humanistic Marxist tradition. These thinkers believed that Marxism could be recast from its materialist determinism into an ideology capable of vanquishing capitalism's cultural hegemony. The critical theory by which we understand literature, art, music, and philosophy was thus to play a role in supplanting "false" (conservative) consciousness with revolutionary consciousness.

One recent attempt at this kind of criticism was *Literary Theory*, a survey book by the Oxford Marxist Terry Eagleton. This book, which bridges Marxism and deconstruction in a facile manner, was a great popular success on American university campuses earlier this year, especially among leftist students and professors. The hostile reviews it received from learned critics missed the point: Eagleton, it would seem, is the Will Durant of the Eighties. Durant was a clever simplifier and vulgarian (*The Story of Civilization*), and so is Eagleton, although in another era and with a different ideology. Durant was a New Deal liberal, Eagleton is a committed Marxist. Their successes have come from the capacity to place their skills as vulgarizers at the service of the chic ideology of the moment.

What Marxism, structuralism, and deconstruction most have in common is a distaste for cultural liberalism's neo-Romantic egotism and existential heroism. They wish to replace this humanistic individuality with the authenticity and integrity of an objective plane—whether the dialectic, the structure, or the "textuality." The hope is, of course, that the liberal heritage of capitalism, the Enlightenment, and Romanticism will give way to a new order. Marxism, structuralism, and deconstruction may each define this order somewhat differently, but in each case a system external to and dominating the individual is envisioned. The self-sustaining,

objective codes of this order will eliminate the legitimacy, creativity, and efficiency that "decadent" liberalism had accorded to the individual. Man, liberal man, capitalist, Enlightenment man, Romantic man, will pass away and in his (damvably bourgeois, white, masculine) place there will arise a new world order that will function universally and homogeneously—from the Amazon village to the Harvard seminar to the Parisian café.

In seeking this transference from subjectivity to objectivity, Marxist, structuralist, and deconstructive critics in the later Seventies and early Eighties have been reflecting their time and place. They were epigones of the New Left movement of the Sixties and early Seventies. They were disappointed that after all the strenuous moral effort and individual sacrifice so little was accomplished by a movement that in May of 1968 appeared to be shaking capitalism to its foundations. Individual commitment and existential heroism were central to the ambiance of the New Left, and radical thinkers of the next decade fastened on this egoistic humanism as a fatal flaw in the movement, and sought instead some kind of objective, impersonal critique of culture and society.

The current generation of college students has grasped these realities reflexively. They have deserted history and English departments by the thousands and enrolled instead as majors in biology and computer science. It will take a great deal of effort and much reflection for liberal humanism to modify itself, win back those students, and maintain a respectable position in the academic world. First, the liberal humanists will have to frankly realize that in leading academic departments, at least fifty percent of the best minds are now committed to the other ideologies, and among scholars below the age of forty, seventy-five percent are so committed. This is where the locus of departmental power now lies.

As the power in leading academic departments is steadily assumed by the Marxists,

feminists, deconstructionists, and their allies, the liberal humanists will have to become familiar with a siege mentality as they work and prepare for a better day. The survival of liberal humanism, if it occurs, will be the work of academic infantry in the trenches, who look up in wonder and confusion as yet another senior chair in the humanities is awarded to a young and brilliant representative of the Left. Even in the better southern institutions, such as Rice and Duke, this is now occurring. Close to home, at Columbia University, the citadel of liberal humanism, the home of Commager, Trilling, Barzun, and Morris, the senior chair in the humanities has been awarded to a leftist ideologue and spokesman for PLO terrorism.

Yet the struggle continues. One of my classes follows in the same room a class on basic American history taught by a Marxist feminist. Twice a week I can hear through the open door the last fifteen minutes of her lecture, and I read the handouts she has distributed to her class. She is an impressive teacher, a commanding presence, and her learning is substantial. What she teaches is pure Marxist feminism. It varies significantly from the view of American history held by Oscar Handlin or Henry Steele Commager, more by what she leaves out than by what she puts in. Women and workers become the almost total focus of American history; others, if mentioned at all, are usually disparaged. Once a month Ms. Luxemburg shows a film—about women or workers; the halls resound with the songs I learned at camp at age fifteen: "Which side are you on?" and so forth. After her class, I teach my class on twentieth-century culture. It has a very different set of assumptions. That is academic freedom. Who will have the greater effect, Ms. Luxemburg or I? To whom does the future of the humanities belong? That will depend on whether the champions of liberal humanism can recover their strength and reconstruct the doctrines and ideals of their own tradition.

Capote's children

by Bruce Bawer

Truman Capote, who died last summer at the age of fifty-eight, was one of a handful of American novelists who became famous at a very early age in the years following the Second World War. Perhaps the three most celebrated of these writers were Gore Vidal (whose *Williwaw* appeared in 1946, when he was nineteen), Norman Mailer (whose *The Naked and the Dead* was issued two years later, when he was twenty-five), and Capote (who published *Other Voices, Other Rooms* in 1949, at the age of twenty-three). If Mailer and Vidal spent the early part of their careers climbing out of derivative ruts and attempting to find their own voices, Capote was an original from the start. This is not to suggest that he did not, in the manner of every young writer, learn from his antecedents. *Other Rooms, Other Voices* is riddled with Southern Gothic touches—grotesque characters, haunting scenes—that are reminiscent of Faulkner and Carson McCullers; its lyrical style and elegiac tone (a tone that was to stay with Capote forever, however radically his style might change) recall Willa Cather; and the situation and the contours of the plot bring to mind both *Jane Eyre* and *The Turn of the Screw*. For all this, to read *Other Voices, Other Rooms* is not to catalogue influences but to appreciate the way Capote makes these varied borrowings over into something entirely his own.

Other Voices, Other Rooms charts the path toward self-discovery of an intelligent, rather delicate thirteen-year-old, Joel Knox, who,

as the novel opens, is finding his way to the grand, dilapidated back-country home of his invalid father, Mr. Sansom, and his stepmother, Miss Amy, neither of whom he has ever met. Joel has been sent for by these two, but, as he eventually discovers, the summons was really the work of the third member of the household: his odd cousin Randolph, who appears one day, ghost-like and dressed as a woman, at an upstairs window. Randolph's yen for Joel is obvious, and at the end of the novel Joel recognizes that his own fate is, to put it delicately, bound up with Randolph's:

His mind was absolutely clear. He was like a camera waiting for its subject to enter focus. The wall yellowed in the meticulous setting of the October sun, and the windows were rippling mirrors of cold, seasonal color. Beyond one, someone was watching him. All of him was dumb except his eyes. They knew. And it was Randolph's window. Gradually the blinding sunset drained from the glass, darkened, and it was as if snow were falling there, flakes shaping snow-eyes, hair: a face trembled like a white beautiful moth, smiled. She beckoned to him, shining and silver, and he knew he must go: unafraid, not hesitating, he paused only at the garden's edge where, as though he'd forgotten something, he stopped and looked back at the bloomless, descending blue, at the boy he had left behind.

Capote never stopped looking back at that boy. The innocence of childhood, the

tragedy of having to trade it in for the sordidness and disillusionment of adulthood: these themes haunt all of Capote's major works. The heroes of his novels are invariably sensitive souls, aliens in the world of civilized, responsible adults, who are tortured by their inability to let go of childhood.

Critics have leveled many complaints against *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms*: that it hasn't got much of a plot, that it doesn't add up to anything, that it's intellectually barren. It's a mood piece, they complain, a stylistic tour de force. Perhaps. But what a mood, what a style! One marvels at the assured prose, at this young writer's ability to sweep one up and carry one, without a misstep, through a mysterious landscape which is to the real Deep South as Hardy's Wessex is to Dorset. One marvels, too, at his ability to defamiliarize—without a trace of self-consciousness—that most tiredly familiar of all first-novel genres, the *Bildungsroman*.

For almost a decade after *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms*, Capote produced one largish project per year. 1949: *A Tree of Night* (a story collection). 1950: *Local Color* (travel essays). 1951: *The Grass Harp* (a novel). 1952: the stage adaptation (unsuccessful) of *The Grass Harp*. 1953: the film *Beat the Devil*. 1954: book and lyrics (including the jazz standard "A Sleepin' Bee") for a Broadway musical, *House of Flowers*, with music by Harold Arlen. 1956: *The Muses Are Heard*, a journal of Capote's trip to the Soviet Union with the cast of *Porgy and Bess*. Clearly, in the early Fifties Capote was already developing the fascination with those glitzy extra-literary milieus (showbiz, café society, the jet set) which were to usurp much of his time and energy over the ensuing years, and evincing a remarkable willingness (and ability) to apply his talents to a variety of genres. Despite this dazzling (and, perhaps, dismaying) versatility, however, Capote continued to devote himself, throughout the 1950s, primarily to prose fiction.

Like *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms*, *The Grass Harp*, his major work of the period, offers a setting in the Deep South, eccentric rela-

tives, grotesque neighbors, an intelligent yet delicate boy's confrontation with adulthood, a thinly veiled homosexual theme—and rich, romantic prose:

When was it that I first heard of the grass harp? Long before the autumn we lived in the China tree; an earlier autumn, then; and of course it was Dolly who told me, no one else would have known to call it that, a grass harp.

If on leaving town you take the church road you soon will pass a glaring hill of bonewhite slabs and brown burnt flowers: this is the Baptist cemetery . . . Below the hill grows a field of high Indian grass that changes color with the seasons: go to see it in the fall, late September, when it has gone red as sunset, when scarlet shadows like firelight breeze over it and the autumn winds strum on its dry leaves sighing human music, a harp of voices.

Beyond the field begins the darkness of River Woods. It must have been one of those September days when we were there in the woods gathering roots that Dolly said: Do you hear? that is the grass harp, always telling a story—it knows the stories of all the people on the hill, of all the people who ever lived, and when we are dead it will tell ours, too.

The speaker here is sixteen-year-old Collin, who lives in a small town with his father's cousins Verena (a tyrant) and the above-mentioned Dolly (the first of many endearing child-women in Capote's work). When Verena returns from a trip to Chicago with a vulgar man named Morris Ritz, who insists upon learning the formula for Dolly's secret herbal medicine—he and Verena want to patent it, market it, and reap the rewards—Collin, Dolly, and their black friend Catherine escape to a tree house in the woods. Complications ensue—some forced and farcical, some melodramatic: the town descends upon them, threatening legal action and physical harm; the local judge and Riley, the town hellion (and Collin's idol), join them in the tree; Ritz absconds with Verena's money; Collin and his companions abandon the tree house; Dolly dies of a stroke; Riley marries; Collin packs his bags

and leaves town, “not foresee[ing] that I would travel the road and dream the tree until they had drawn me back.” *The Grass Harp* demonstrates that Capote’s aims had changed somewhat since his first book: he wanted to be not only moving but *funny*, to create a mood *and* tell a relatively involved story, and to concentrate less on his boy-hero and more on the people around him. But the style of this short novel did not, for the most part, depart markedly from the lyrical, meditative manner of *Other Voices*, *Other Rooms*.

Capote continued to develop, though, and in the same direction. By the time of *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1958), he was even more concerned with developing a plot, being humorous, and looking beyond his protagonist (who had, by now, grown into a young man); and he had, fortunately, developed a style that suited these ends perfectly. That style, *New Yorker*ishly terse and precise, is reminiscent of J. D. Salinger, and so is the setting, “a brownstone in the East Seventies . . . during the early years of the war.” The hero of the novella is a fledgling Southern (and, though he never says so explicitly, homosexual) writer who lives in that brownstone; the heroine, Holly Golightly, is a gorgeous, stylish playgirl in the apartment directly below, who peppers her conversation with French expressions, earns her living by dating middle-aged men and delivering coded messages to a “sweet” Mafia kingpin named Sally Tomato, and hopes to marry very, very rich. *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* marks a switch in Capote’s stylistic emphasis from evocative description to dialogue—which is, in its own way, equally evocative:

“Be a darling, darling, rub some oil on my back.” While I was performing this service, she said: “O. J. Berman’s in town, and listen, I gave him your story in the magazine. He was quite impressed. He thinks maybe you’re worth helping. But he says you’re on the wrong track. Negroes and children: who cares?”

“Not Mr. Berman, I gather.”

“Well, I agree with him. I read that story twice. Brats and niggers. Trembling leaves. *Description*. It doesn’t *mean* anything.”

The twist in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* is that Holly (who seems here, perhaps, to have been reading something very much like *The Grass Harp*) is a hillbilly girl, real name Lulamae, the runaway wife of a horse doctor in Tulip, Texas, who is old enough to be her grandfather. She is, at bottom, a scared, vulnerable Southern child, a self-exile, compelled by her helpless fear of the responsibilities of adulthood to wander far from home, binding herself to no one, trying desperately to lose sight of her terror and loneliness among the bright lights and the nightclub crowds of New York.

The more closely one looks at *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* the more difficult it is to avoid feeling that the novella is something of a schizophrenic act on Capote’s part. One side of him (the disciplined, mature writer) observes the other (the wild, frivolous party-goer, enthralled by criminals and enamored of the very, very rich, who refuses to grow up). The ego lives upstairs, the id downstairs. Not that this Freudian schema is at all conspicuous; on the contrary, few contemporary American novels provide as good an example as *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* does of Flaubertian economy, elegance, and (seeming) objectivity. It is Capote’s finest work—witty, affecting, not a word wasted.

Many, of course, would accord that distinction to *In Cold Blood* (1966). This study of the 1958 murder of the Clutter family of Holcomb, Kansas, is undeniably riveting, but Capote’s lifelong tendency to identify with the outsider led him, in this instance, to present the facts in such a way that the reader has to struggle to avoid sympathizing with the murderers, Perry Smith and Richard Hickock. As Capote describes them, the Clutters are *Reader’s Digest*-reading robots, fudge-baking clones, church-going zombies, who have no great ambitions, no profound torments, no interest in pursuing anything other than the unexamined life. Contrasted

with these card-carrying members of the Bible Belt *booboisie* are the two killers. The Clutters' murderers—Perry Smith especially—fascinated Capote. In Perry, a small, childlike man with an I.Q. of 130, a careful of books, maps, poems, and letters, and a preoccupation with his memories of boyhood, Capote appears to have seen a sensitive soul—and, one suspects, yet another alter ego. Though the tone of *In Cold Blood* is controlled and impersonal, the fact is that Capote developed a warm friendship with the murderers during his years of research; at the end, he accompanied them to the scaffold, wept for days over their deaths, and even paid for their grave markers. One wishes, for the sake of *In Cold Blood*, that he had been as close to the Clutters. Even that, though, would probably not have been enough: Capote's fascination with murder and murderers (which by no means ended with *In Cold Blood*) was too profound, and his aloofness from moral considerations (in these matters, at least) too extreme, to allow for much authorial sympathy for the victims.¹

Capote trumpeted that he had, in *In Cold Blood*, created a new literary form, the "non-fiction novel." Some critics hailed this "invention," others dismissed it. Norman Mailer suggested that Capote's swing to nonfiction bespoke "a failure of imagination," and then (as Capote spent the next eighteen years pointing out) wrote *The Armies of the Night*, a "novel-as-history," and

won the Pulitzer Prize for it. *In Cold Blood* is, of course, no novel; but it is a very sophisticated piece of New Journalism, the sort of handsomely written, subtly partisan reportage that only a gifted author of fiction could have concocted.

After *In Cold Blood*, Capote continued to experiment with genre. He published less and less; during most of the nearly two decades between the publication of *In Cold Blood* and his death, Capote claimed to be working hard at a book called *Answered Prayers*, which he described as "a variation on the nonfiction novel." (The title "is a quote from Saint Thérèse, who said: 'More tears are shed over answered prayers than unanswered ones.'") Chapters from this work-in-progress appeared in *Esquire* during the mid-Seventies, and the information they disclosed about certain of Capote's café society friends—who, by that time, seemed to have become far more important to him than his writing—supposedly turned all of them against him. (This rejection, in turn, reportedly drove him to the heavy drinking and drug-taking that brought on his death.) The excerpts didn't do Capote's literary reputation much good either. Critics saw *Answered Prayers* as gossip, not serious literature—the work of a man grown lazy and self-indulgent. And they were, unfortunately, right: the *Esquire* excerpts represent a surrender, on Capote's part, to those more puerile tendencies that were evident in—but did not, at any rate, tyrannize—his earlier work. To be sure, one can discern, in reading the excerpts (which *are* beautifully composed), that Capote did have at least a ghost of a serious literary intention here. He wanted to say the usual things about fame, wealth, and the wages of ambition, while doing for the New York society of the 1970s what Edith Wharton had done for the New York society of the 1870s. The excerpts do succeed in one sense: they prove beyond a doubt that most of the rich ladies who spend their afternoons at La Côte Basque and La Grenouille are dull and shallow. This, indeed, seems to be Capote's main point. But why, if these women *are* so

1 In *Conversations with Capote*, published last year, Lawrence Grobel asks: "Have you ever wondered why you are able to relate so well to murderers?" Capote replies: "Because right away they realized that I wasn't passing any judgment on them. I had no opinion about them as a person regarding the fact that they'd killed . . ." The book—which consists mostly of insulting remarks about nearly everyone Capote ever knew—was published by the New American Library (244 pages, \$14.95). Also recently issued is *Three by Truman Capote*, which includes *Other Voices, Other Rooms*; *Breakfast at Tiffany's*; and *Music for Chameleons* (Random House, 358 pages, \$12.95).

dull and shallow, would anyone want to spend a decade of his life reproducing their silly chatter and collecting their gossip—or, for that matter, keeping them company? It is, to be sure, possible that *Answered Prayers*, as Capote envisioned it, would have added up to a profound, penetrating novel of contemporary manners. But the published excerpts, as they stand, do not penetrate very deeply.²

It appears likely that we shall never know precisely what *Answered Prayers* could have been. An article by Julie Baumgold which appeared last fall in *New York* magazine told the story. After Capote's death, his biographer, his editor, and his lawyer searched his Long Island house but failed to find a single page of the manuscript that he had claimed, for so many years, to be toiling over, and which (though he had never shown it to anybody) he had expostulated upon at length in countless interviews. After looking everywhere, Capote's friends faced what appeared to be the unpleasant truth: there was no *Answered Prayers*; Capote had seemingly been lying for years about his progress on it. It is, of course, possible that he had produced hundreds of pages of his intended *magnum opus*, but had found them unworthy and destroyed them in the course of attempted revision.

In the preface to his final book, *Music for Chameleons*, Capote indicated that he had stopped work on *Answered Prayers* as the result of "a creative crisis and a personal one" that came upon him at the same time. These crises, as it turned out, "altered my entire comprehension of writing, my attitude toward art and life and the balance between

the two, and my understanding of the difference between what is true and what is *really* true." The upshot is that he began to rewrite *Answered Prayers* in an entirely new style. That style—which dominates *Music for Chameleons*—represents yet another step in the direction Capote had been moving all along: toward greater concision and "realism," a heavier reliance upon dialogue, and a more comprehensive combination of forms. The idea was to "combine within a single form . . . all [he knew] about every other form of writing A writer ought to have all his colors, all his abilities available on the same palette for mingling (and, in suitable instances, simultaneous application)."

The longest and most effective of the pieces in *Music for Chameleons*, a "nonfiction short novel" called "Handcarved Coffins," describes a bizarre-but-true series of crimes that Capote followed closely during the late Seventies; the new style works well here, and the story, though shorn of the depth and detail of *In Cold Blood*, has an immediacy, an emotional force, and a quality of genuine suspensefulness and terror that Capote had never achieved before. The "Conversational Portraits" that occupy nearly half of *Music for Chameleons* are somewhat less ambitious. As the collective title indicates, each of these short pieces consists of the record of a conversation between Capote and someone he finds interesting—Pearl Bailey, Bobby Beau-soleil (of Manson Family fame), Mary Sanchez (Capote's cleaning lady). In the most celebrated of these pieces, "A Beautiful Child," Capote describes his cavortings on an April day in 1955 in Manhattan with Marilyn Monroe, whom he sees as a Holly Golightly-like child-woman, a beautiful innocent adrift on the corrupt seas of life. The cavortings end at twilight on South Street Seaport:

MARILYN: Remember, I said if anybody ever asked you what I was like, what Marilyn Monroe was *really* like—well, how would you answer them? (Her tone was teasing, mocking, yet earnest, too: she wanted an honest reply) I bet you'd tell them I was a slob. A banana split.

2 Interestingly, as far back as 1964, Norman Mailer had foreseen both *Answered Prayers* and its consequences. In his famous *Esquire* piece, "Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room," Mailer wrote of Capote: "I would suspect he hesitates between the attractions of Society which enjoys and so repays him for his unique gifts, and the novel he could write of the gossip column's real life, a major work, but it would banish him forever from his favorite world."

TC: Of course. But I'd also say . . .

(The light was leaving. She seemed to fade with it, blend with the sky and clouds, recede beyond them. I wanted to lift my voice louder than the seagulls' cries and call her back: Marilyn! Marilyn, why did everything have to turn out the way it did? Why does life have to be so fucking rotten?)

TC: I'd say . . .

MARILYN: I can't hear you.

TC: I'd say you are a beautiful child.

There is some lovely writing in the work that Capote published after *In Cold Blood*, and the mixed-salad style of *Music for Chameleons* is often surprisingly successful. But—as pieces like “A Beautiful Child” graphically illustrate—the appeal of much of this work has relatively little to do with its literary merits. Capote, in his zeal to write “nonfiction novels” and “nonfiction short stories,” may well have thought that he was being faithful to “what is *really* true,” but all he was doing, in actuality, was neglecting his obligation as a literary artist to create, to order, and

thereby to serve not merely personal and superficial truths but universal ones. It is an obligation to which Capote was attentive for so long, and which he fulfilled with such distinction, that his ultimate renunciation of it (manifestly well-intentioned though it may have been) is particularly disheartening. Because of this renunciation—and for the other reasons I have suggested—it is, perhaps, easier to celebrate the fine literary talent Capote was gifted with than to applaud many of the uses he made of it. The Capote-like narrator of one of the published *Answered Prayers* excerpts, writer P. B. Jones, remarks at one point: “I knew I was a bastard but forgave myself because I was *born* a bastard—a talented one whose sole obligation was to his talent.” This sounds exactly like Capote talking about himself, and it describes what may well have been Capote's tragic flaw: that throughout most of his adult life, he considered himself to be responsible only to his talent. It seems never to have occurred to him that his talent, in turn, might have its own responsibilities.

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Sartre and Giacometti: words between friends

by James Lord

One evening in 1939 Alberto Giacometti found himself lingering late at the Café de Flore in Paris. Most of the other customers had gone, but at the adjoining table sat a man alone. Presently he leaned toward Alberto and said, "Pardon me, but I've often seen you here, and I think we're the sort of people who understand each other. I happen to have no money on me. Would you mind paying for my drink?" That was the kind of request Alberto could never have refused. He promptly paid for the stranger's drink. A conversation ensued, and it did seem that the two men were the sort of people who understood each other. Twenty-five years later it would be worth recalling that their friendship had begun with such an optimistic assumption. The man who made it was Jean-Paul Sartre.

Alberto had certainly heard of him, and he of Alberto. The sculptor and the writer would inevitably have met sooner or later, as they had several friends in common, and once they had met it was inevitable that they should be attracted to each other. Exuberant, brilliant, and outgoing, both men relished the unpredictable give and take of self-discovery at levels which—often—only they could fathom.

Four years younger than Giacometti, Sartre was short and plain, if not ugly, with heavy glasses and a nearly sightless right eye, which had the unfortunate effect of making it seem that he avoided giving you a straight look. The only child of a mother widowed

early, he was precocious, timorous, and soon developed a ferocious aversion for the comfortable, well-meaning circumstances in which he was reared. He proved his precocity with zest as a student of philosophy at the Sorbonne, where he met a young woman, also a person of exceptional intellect and like him the product of a bourgeois background repudiated with ferocity. Tall and pretty, she had such an industrious devotion to hard work that she already bore the nickname which would stick to her for life: the Beaver. From the first there was no doubt on either side that Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were people who understood each other. Theirs was one of those rare meetings of minds which make the matings of the herd seem lamentably bestial. They saw eye to eye, it appeared, on everything, including marriage, which they spurned, rejecting en masse all bourgeois standards and conventions, confident of their ability to distinguish good from evil, right from wrong, and truth from falsehood. Despite their devotion to the sole dictates of reason, Sartre and the Beaver liked a good time. They acquired plenty of friends, with whom they enjoyed long evenings of challenging talk in the cafés of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. They even found it possible upon occasion to make fun of each other, showing in the process that their extraordinary powers of discernment were indeed objective and that neither of them could be explained without reference to the other. Sartre called Simone

"a clock in a refrigerator," while she said that "Sartre only associates with people who associate with Sartre."

Of those who associated with Sartre only because he associated with them one of the most welcome was Giacometti. Like everyone who met him, Sartre realized at once that the bushy-haired sculptor was an extraordinary personality. As a trained philosopher he also knew how to recognize a first-rate mind and understood that one man's contemplation of reality may benefit the vision of another. Alberto's intellect was not made for neat and systematic thought. He was a master of quirky intuitions, unpredictable shifts in point of view, contradictory logic, and speculative leaps of the imagination, all of which could slide into laughter when man's search for clairvoyance looked like the joke of the universe. Conversation with Alberto was exceptional and fascinating because the same passion which drove him to work drove him to pursue every topic as if it had never before been broached. Extraordinary as his conversation was, however, perhaps the quality of his silences was even more remarkable. He had a way of listening to other people with such complete absorption that they felt more fully themselves as a result. Sartre was impressed. What impressed him most was Alberto's uncompromising commitment to experience as a search for the absolute, admittedly doomed to failure but more imperative for that very reason. This was how Sartre expected to live his own life. This was how he expected the Beaver to live hers, and how he expected everyone who associated with him to live. He was nothing if not all of a piece.

Being persnickety appraisers of humankind, the two philosophers, who later composed a good deal of fiction, would naturally have noticed from the beginning that their newfound friend did not make his way through life or through the world in the same way they did. In the first place, his point of departure had nothing whatever in common with theirs. Giacometti was born in a tiny village in southeastern Switzerland, albeit on a highway much travelled over

since Roman times; his heritage was mainly Mediterranean, more nourished by the instinctual mythology of the south than by the rational abstractions of the north. His father had been a distinguished painter, while his mother, though anything but a peasant, was a woman who had always lived very close to the earth, presiding with ceremonious authority over its seasonal metamorphoses and over the fortunes of her family. Alberto's intelligence had been cultivated by the mere fecundity of genius, as he never went near a university. He lived and worked in circumstances of spartan simplicity so stark as to teeter on the verge of squalor, and he clung to them till the day he died. Thus, neither in his past nor in his present was there the slightest immanence that invited atonement for the popular guilt of being bourgeois.

In the second place, there was one aspect that especially called attention to itself regarding the different manner by which Giacometti made his way through the world and through life. He limped. Had this peculiarity of bearing by any chance failed to attract notice, the sculptor invariably appeared in public armed with an implement made to order to indicate what was what: a cane, the age-old symbol of disablement or decrepitude. And had even this symbol by chance failed of effect, then Alberto deliberately eliminated chance from the equation of his deportment by talking very often about the incident which had caused its peculiarity. This had been banal, and yet it stayed in the artist's mind and at the tip of his tongue with such unflagging persistence that its very banality would have seemed to cry out for the perception of some extraordinary—and enduring—import. The facts were these: late one night of the previous October, Giacometti had found himself standing alone in the Place des Pyramides on the narrow strip of sidewalk surrounding the equestrian statue of Joan of Arc, when suddenly an automobile came hurtling at him, veered onto the sidewalk, and grazed him, crushing his right foot and throwing him to the pavement, careening onward under the arcade

and crashing into a shop window. The injury to Alberto's foot was not serious. His metatarsal arch had been fractured, though not so badly as to require surgery for realignment of the broken bones, which were expected by the sculptor's doctor to knit perfectly within six to eight weeks, leaving no permanent effect whatever. Neither the victim's foot nor its normal capacity to propel him through life like any other man were supposed to suffer the least impairment. But that is not how things turned out. When the plaster cast had been removed, the doctor pronounced himself well pleased, promising that prompt resumption of his patient's former walk now depended only on conscientious re-education of the damaged member. That, however, is precisely what Alberto neglected to undertake. He found it great fun to walk with crutches, and when these became almost inconveniently superfluous, he adopted a cane, to which he obstinately clung for almost eight years, though it was never physically indispensable, seeming, indeed, so nearly an affectation or so much the symbol of an infirmity lodged in his imagination rather than his foot that his own mother irritably admonished him to set it aside. He refused. And yet maternal admonitions were those that meant most to the conduct of his life. There were times when the limp was barely perceptible, if at all. However, he talked—and what an irresistible, spellbinding talker he was—and talked and talked about the accident. Nobody who knew him in the least well can have failed to be aware of what had happened one autumn night in the Place des Pyramides in front of the statue of Joan of Arc. That event became a crucial, virtually legendary turning point in the story of what Giacometti himself called "my long march." He attributed to it powers and consequences close to magical. He said that he had been happy when he realized that he was to be permanently lamed, because this condition allowed him to make positive progress as an artist.

The nature of such progress as well as the reasons for it remained nicely conjectural,

for it was at this juncture that the sculptor began making minuscule figurines so unsatisfying to him—and yet so compelling—that he destroyed almost all of them, though they were the direct genetic forebears of those tall, slender figures which definitively embodied his creative vision seven or eight years later (when, incidentally, he at last felt disposed to walk without a cane). The benefit, such as it was, not to mention the advantage, of all this compulsive talk on Alberto's part was not solely in the realm of aesthetics. The artist's personal life had also been greatly helped as a consequence of the injury to his foot, which he quite soon started describing as far more serious than in fact it had been. Only a decade or so after the accident his frequent descriptions of it sometimes included assertions that the maimed member had actually been in grave danger of amputation. The injury itself had occurred as the pivotal event in a very important love affair, which until then had been inconclusive and deeply frustrating but which afterward by some magic metamorphosis of feeling seems to have become quite happy, although the consummation that love affairs normally want was in this case indefinitely deferred. The inconclusiveness of the affair, as a matter of fact, was directly related to the accident, and Alberto willingly said so, because on the night in question he had but a few minutes previously taken leave of the woman he loved, an English girl of exceptional beauty and vitality named Isabel Delmer, at the door to her hotel. "If I'd been a real man," he often said, "I wouldn't have been in the street at that moment." Thus, the accident could hardly be considered a haphazard occurrence but rather a fateful step in the rare, terrible causality which makes a mere life into the enactment of a destiny. And, indeed, when he talked about his injury, Alberto sometimes let it seem that he had placed himself on purpose in the way of that careening car (driven, incidentally, by a woman).

People were impressed by the candor with which Giacometti spontaneously spoke of matters that most men would have been too

self-conscious to reveal. Alberto shrank from no disclosure. Even his sexual life was an open book, although on that score, considering what was to be said, almost anyone, whether man or woman, would definitely have preferred to keep the book shut. But the whole point about Alberto was that virtually no one could have been less like everyone else than he, a fact at its most glaring when he occasionally maintained that what he did could be done just as well by any passerby in the street. As for sexual prowess, however, he readily acknowledged that it was limited. Perhaps, to be sure, this acknowledgment came a bit too readily. Anyway, he said that despite powerful desires he frequently found himself unable to gratify them when opportunity offered. Impotence, in a word—a rather symbolical word—was his problem. This predicament, of course, was as commonplace as the riddle of the sphinx, though as complex at the same time as the dilemma of the man most famed for having found an answer.

That people were impressed by such candid self-exposure is not surprising. In Alberto's candor, however, there dwelt a potential surprise of such proportion that for the few able to discern authentic greatness it became really astounding. Jean-Paul Sartre was certainly able, and more than willing, to be counted among those few. Giacometti's need, his compulsion, to talk with absolute liberty about himself, his occupations, interests, thoughts, feelings, and all the events of his life was not for a minute the expression of a selfish or self-centered individual. On the contrary! When he talked about himself he always seemed to be talking about one man in order to talk about mankind, and when he revealed the entire truth concerning his own life he unmistakably spoke out of his deepest conviction: that there is nothing worth talking about lest it reveal the entire truth about all life. His lifelong endeavor to look at people, at landscapes, at objects as they actually are in all their actuality was an outcome of his masterful will to see truth and to make something truthful out of his vision of it. This brought to his

conversation, as to his work, the kind of universality which enabled him to have something worth saying to everybody. For a person like Sartre, whose aspiration was to devise a definitive intellectual set of man's situation in the universe, Giacometti's ability to tell the truth must have been spell-binding.

So the friendship between the sculptor and the philosopher got off to an auspicious start. Mutual friends were awed by the brilliant, exciting exchange of their conversations, and in her journal the Beaver industriously regretted that they were not preserved on tape for posterity. Alberto had an important influence on Sartre's thought. To be sure, it was an abstract influence, because Sartre trusted only in abstractions to lead him safely through the treacherous world of appearances. Yet Alberto was not given to abstractions. Both in his work and in his life he came to grips as closely as he could with raw materials. Besides, he never believed that sculpture could save man—or the artist—from himself, whereas Sartre was convinced that words could, should, and would.

Giacometti's work was disconcerting to his new friends. They didn't know what to think of the minuscule figurines by means of which the sculptor was endeavoring to establish the perception of a human form in an absolute situation in space, thus eliminating from the creative process the misapprehensions both of subjective idealism and of false objectivity. But they were willing to learn, and the lesson—for Sartre—proved to be essential. Though Alberto saw where he was going only gradually, step by step, he knew what he was doing and knew how to say so. Sartre listened. What he heard seemed of phenomenal relevance to the philosopher who was soon to write a treatise entitled *Being and Nothingness*.

The Second World War, which made an enduring difference to every aspect of life on earth, made a difference to the friendship between Sartre and Giacometti, too. Before it both men had been relatively ob-

scure, known as author and artist only to a few. In 1941 Alberto went to Switzerland to visit his mother, and once there found himself forbidden by the authorities to return to Paris until the war was over. In the meanwhile Sartre had become famous. *Being and Nothingness* had been made much of, albeit little understood, while novels and plays from the philosopher's pen won great prestige, and he was active in resistance against the Nazi enemy. Even before the war's end he had been permitted as a journalist to go to the United States, where he met with President Roosevelt, and he was already preparing to launch the politico-literary review, *Les Temps modernes*, which dominated intellectual discourse in France for a quarter of a century. His philosophical position, making a catchword of existentialism, set a literary trend and became a fashionable craze among the postwar young. Sartre was a celebrity, and Simone de Beauvoir was hard at work to attain the same status.

Giacometti, on the other hand, was obscurer than ever, his brief shine as a Surrealist luminary now but a dim memory. After three and a half lonely, laborious years in a tiny hotel room in Geneva he had returned with nothing more to show for his trouble than about a dozen statuettes of which the very largest stood no more than two inches high. To most people this didn't look like much. He mentioned, though, that he had spent a great deal of time meditating on the aspirations and achievements of Paul Cézanne. Nor was he in the least perturbed by the conspicuous lack of public awareness that his own achievements amounted to anything. He often used to say, "Maybe the most effective way of having success is to flee from it." Besides, there were a few people who saw very well what Alberto amounted to, and who understood it even better when they heard him explain how little, in view of the absolute, this was. Picasso said that Giacometti's work represented "a new spirit in sculpture," and Sartre considered Giacometti's so-called failures more fascinating than the majority of supposed successes.

Though nobody would have mistaken him for a celebrity, Alberto, too, when he reappeared in Paris after the war, was clearly a changed man. Always a singular and imposing personality, with the assumption of genius thrown in to point up his singularity, now a special aura seemed to mark him as a man apart. It was the onset of that massive accretion of creative and spiritual power which gradually made him a legendary figure. Although a man of his own time, who personified, indeed, certain of its most characteristic aspects, Giacometti was committed all his life to a concept of creative integrity most admirably illustrated, he felt, by the anonymous artists of ancient Egypt. "If I were true to myself," he once remarked, "I'd bury all my sculptures so that they wouldn't be found for a thousand years." That attitude wasn't likely to make a man a celebrity. But Sartre was quick to see the existential grandeur of it. The prolific author prided himself on the prerogatives of friendship as well as on the power of his aesthetic perceptions and consequently was pleased when an occasion presented itself to prove so by the printed word.

This occasion was the first one-man exhibition of works by Giacometti to have been shown since 1934. It was being prepared for the early winter of 1948, and not in Paris but in New York, where people had begun awakening to the fact that the political center of the free world was soon to be its artistic center, and the man to organize this event was, ironically enough, a Frenchman, Pierre Matisse, son of the famed painter. Sartre gladly penned a four-thousand-word essay as a preface to the exhibition catalogue. Entitled "The Search for the Absolute," it is a brilliant intellectual edifice erected upon the scaffolding of Giacometti's own, oft-reiterated ideas. The author is at pains to explicate the artist's response to the human predicament, a response he methodically defines as a fundamental renewal of perceptual procedure and creative activity, interpreted as a felicitous example of existentialist commitment. Alberto always asserted that a man must strive to be honest

with himself and with others, divest himself of illusions, and come to viable terms with life as a condition basically absurd but essentially valuable. Never, though, did he mean his work to express or illustrate any hypothetical system of thought. And yet it was widely seen as "an art of existential reality," a formal effort to depict man's solitude in a precarious, incomprehensible universe. The essay by Sartre had much to do with promoting this view, which seemed compatible with the frailty of the sculptor's figures and the stark isolation in which they are situated. In New York the intellectual artistic community was greatly impressed both by the essay and by the sculptures, for both appeared exemplary of the spiritual malaise provoked not only by fear for the future but also by increasing consternation as the full horror of the recent past became cumulatively clearer, so clear, indeed, that no human imagination could ever encompass it all. Giacometti was certainly a witness to his era, and his work gave form to something in the contemporary condition too profound to be made known in any other way—even to him. He was not motivated, however, by anything so obvious as a desire to represent the *Zeitgeist*. Seeing, not believing, was what he cared about, and that compelled him to stand very much by himself in the world. It took fortitude to do that, a kind of moral heroism, which the young artists and critics of the New York School were quick to recognize and admire as a touchstone in their own, very different quest for fulfillment.

Alberto was surely not displeased to have Sartre's words serve his own endeavor, although the philosophical construction put upon it, however laudatory, made it less concrete rather than more. Friendship reflected for Giacometti a vital aspect of his conviction that people are the most interesting things on earth and that therefore nothing is more interesting than to try to see them as they truly are. He gave his interest, his trust, his affection very freely, expecting nothing in return save the compact of good faith. With Sartre this seemed all for the best, as good faith was the decisive criterion

of existentialist ethics: if, after all, man is totally free and entirely responsible for his actions, if, indeed, existence precedes essence, then the rule of right action can only be drawn from a widely shared belief that the individual may be trusted to act out of a disinterested care for human justice. Not a simple proposition. But neither Sartre nor Giacometti were seeking to make things simple for themselves. The kind of difficulties they sought, however, seemed to stand somewhat in opposition. The sculptor was striving to perceive the whole world within the compass of his studio, whereas the writer aspired to issue from his study perceptions that would encompass the world as a whole. This latter ambition inevitably led to the arena of idealistic controversy and political contention.

Sartre and the Beaver were resolved to participate in, if not positively to precipitate, the events which determined the whole cultural climate of their era. This determination to be in the forefront of the forefront would entail many a twist and turn of itinerary. In the immediate postwar period the course most crucial to be decided on, so it seems, was the one which might or might not lead a man of honor to be a fellow traveller with the Communists. Many intellectuals and artists, Picasso among them, forgetting the Nazi-Soviet pact, forgetting Finland and Poland, forgetting the purge trials, forgetting even the great terror of the Yezhovshchina, went along with Communism as a final answer to the human problems which humanity has made insoluble. Sartre couldn't quite see his way to doing that, while Simone would never have presumed to go it alone. But he played largely into the Communists' hands by being an extremely verbose and eloquent opponent of anything that looked like established authority. His own power over words was so masterful that he could challenge his ability to use them for legitimate effect by inveigling a semblance of truth from the etymological wonder of his virtuosity. To Sartre the blasphemy of bourgeois values called for a lifetime of moral reassessment, and quite a lot of it came

down on the Communist side of the world-view. He went alternately hot and cold about Stalin, Mao, and plenty of others but never failed to have something to say, and even when it was absurd could turn it to advantage as evidence that a writer is by definition a being who gets into trouble with words. He asserted that there was no truth without Marxism. What the Party regulars wanted, however, was unquestioning allegiance. What they frequently got was a hectoring lecture on some ethical issue. If at times there seemed to be a streak of masochism in Sartre's involvement with the Communists, he could very well point out that anyone prepared to spend his life in solitude seated at a writing table must by nature be disposed to accept quite a lot of self-punishment.

Giacometti would have agreed. Anyway, he was always glad to get into a lively argument. Concerning Communism, his mind had been made up before he met Sartre. In his youth, and like so many impressionable youths in those optimistic, cosmetic years before the Spanish Civil War, Alberto had exuberantly endorsed the Communist daydream. As the real complexion of the nightmare grew hideously clear, however, he looked clearly at it and with his usual candor declared that it wouldn't do. "Everything that I am," he said, "and want to be, and care about, is considered decadent by the Communists. Why should I take a stand that eliminates myself?" He never did. On ideological grounds, indeed, he never took a stand that eliminated anyone, including Sartre, who took countless stands eliminating countless people, if not entire classes of them, on grounds as constantly capricious as the very climate of modern times themselves. But Alberto never called into question his friend's good faith. Nonetheless, he got very tired sometimes of talk that raised an issue higher and higher only to end it in midair like a fakir's rope.

On November 1, 1954, armed rebels rose up against French colonists in Algeria, precipitating an eight-year trauma of civic spirit as drastic as the Dreyfus Affair. Nobody

who lived in France during that period, whether a citizen of the country or not, could possibly have remained unconcerned by the national crisis of conscience. The issues at stake were far more complex than eventual independence for the North African colony, and the one most burning was that of trying to determine what allegiance was owed by a man of good faith to a government which does not keep honorable compact with its constitution. That was the most tormenting problem, and the widespread use of torture by the French army did nothing to ease it. The nation's intellectuals were at pains to try to define, and abide by, the mandate of individual responsibility. Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, always impatient to be in the vanguard of ethical fray, were among the fiercest critics of national policy. Never one to mince words, Sartre embraced with ardor the brutal facts of revolutionary life. "The rebel's weapon," he wrote, "is the proof of his manhood. For in the first days of the revolt you must kill: to shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone, to destroy an oppressor and the man he oppresses at the same time." Terrible words in a troubled world. Less celebrated men were beaten, burned, and done to death by army torturers in Algeria for less. Sartre was talked to by the police in Paris—politely—but never detained. He could take an axe to the splitting of moral hairs without fear of harm to a single one on his own head. The authorities were too cultivated and too ruthless to risk making a martyr of their most famous *littérateur*. Besides, his only weapons were words, while they had bombs, guns, and electrodes. The philosopher's pronouncements sometimes appealed more to passion than to perspicacity, but he was never afraid of being caught in a contradiction, being the first to assert that a fearless literary career can accomplish very little in the context of humanity's total struggle. For example, he, who had never seen the inside of a prison, declared that Jean Genet could not be a true revolutionary because he was a homosexual, and the two states of being were mutually exclusive.

Giacometti was embarrassed by statements like that one. He said, "It's always unpleasant to hear an intelligent friend say something stupid." Moreover, he and Sartre were not of the same mind about what it took to be a revolutionary, or about what, for that matter, any individual may find it in his interests to rebel against. Alberto used to say, "The best way for an artist to be a revolutionary is to do his work as well as he can." Given as he was to the struggle in his studio, he nonetheless identified himself deeply with the oppressed, the outcast, and the wretched of the earth, and the bleak austerity of his lodgings emphasized the likeness of his lot with theirs. Sartre, on the other hand, was set up in perfectly respectable comfort, and the unforgiving hater of bourgeois values, who had once needed a charitable stranger to pay for his drink, now felt uneasy when going out to dine if he carried less than two thousand dollars in cash on his person and had acquired the admiration of waiters as a prodigious dispenser of tips. Nothing, though, interfered with the friendship between sculptor and author. Both, after all, were creative men, and men to whom the concept of mutual understanding in their respective realms of creativity allowed very generously for differences of opinion, assuming, of course, that the allowance itself could be chalked up to the credit of good faith. Every week they had lunch together at a second-rate restaurant called *La Palette*, where the walls were lined with paintings of blue lagoons, vases of gladioli, and ballet dancers *en déshabille*. Gazing at them, Alberto would often sigh and murmur, "That's the kind of art one can sincerely admire."

In 1962, with the Algerian war brought to an excessively messy conclusion, Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir looked around for something to do and decided on a jaunt to the Soviet Union, where they were the honored guests of the Union of Soviet Writers. Though he had never knuckled under to the duress of party allegiance, Sartre had all in all proved willing to make his flirtation with Communism an affair as nearly matrimonial as it could get without going to

the dialectical altar. He obligingly disparaged the Nobel award to Boris Pasternak, and from Soviet podiums made eloquent speeches pleading for the "demilitarization" of culture. Existential responsibility thus discharged, loathing for the bourgeois temporarily appeased, the philosopher retired with the Beaver to a luxurious double suite at the Albergo Nazionale in Rome and there bethought himself of what he might do next. He had spent a lifetime writing, had made a self-justifying cause of the writer's vocation, and had come to terms with reality both inward and outward as a vindication of his ability to write about it. He had written at great length about writing and other writers, Jean Genet and Flaubert in particular. And now, in Rome, between interviews with the head of the Italian Communist Party and Latin American revolutionaries, he thought he could not do better than write about himself and his lifelong infatuation with words. Autobiography, in short. For a word-smith, surely, the most treacherous conceivable terrain. Taking as basis a manuscript set aside a dozen years before, when political commitments had led him to question the validity of his calling, Sartre dashed off in less than twelve months an autobiographical volume describing his childhood, his compulsion to become a prodigy, his aptitude first for learning to read by pretending that he could when he couldn't and then for writing stories by plagiarizing the stories of other writers, a process that prompted him to retreat from life into the inviolable world of words. Words became for him "the quintessence of things," more real than what they denoted. Made of words, his autobiography, he said, was yet directed to the heart as well as to the intellect, while meaning to explore and evaluate the entire significance of language in human experience. Its title: *The Words*. Though devoted in principle wholly to the years of childhood, the book is a dissection of the child by the mature man and a cold-blooded analysis of the effect upon the adult of the child's blind adoration of books. He questioned the goodness of that effect, observing that culture cannot

“save” anything or anyone, but acknowledged that his devotion to the just and purposeful use of words kept its power to sustain him. And as an autobiographer contemplating the circumstances of his own childhood, Sartre demonstrated his belief that everything in an individual’s existence has a meaning, that nothing in life is truly accidental, and that what may appear to be a happening is in reality an act.

The Words was an instant success, soaring overnight to the summit of bestseller lists, sought immediately for translation into a dozen other languages and adding vastly to its author’s prestige, renown, and income. Hailed at once as a masterpiece, *The Words* was compared to that mighty monument of Gallic self-analysis, the *Confessions* of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a work which remains one of the most widely read of world literature and as such proves the capacity of words to triumph over the limitations of man’s own nature and of the nature into which without his consent he is thrust by birth. Whether or not the author of *Being and Nothingness* will be found fit by posterity to rub shoulders with the author of *The Social Contract* is for time to tell, but if so his autobiography will no doubt furnish one of the principal findings in his favor. It was very quickly talked about as a persuasive argument in favor of the Nobel Prize, and certainly the book is a most impressive literary edifice put together by a master builder working with materials which constituted, as he was the first to assert, the foundation of his whole existence. And that is no easy feat to bring off. Built into the crowning glory of it, however, may be an inherent flaw upon which the premise of its structural validity stands as a mere semblance, because the written word has an ambiguous relation to action: it implies a remove from direct experience and effective responsibility and it insinuates that an author’s passion for putting together words rises from the need to build a barrier between his vulnerable self and a world indifferent, hence hostile, to the resources of his vocabulary. Be that as it may, when Anne-Marie Sartre had finished

reading her son’s autobiography, she remarked that he had understood nothing about his childhood, an observation, it would seem, well chosen to accord with the philosopher’s conviction that words are quite as fallible as humans, and maybe more so.

Giacometti, when he came to read the analysis by his old friend of how art takes hold of an artist’s life and molds it to suit the needs which it itself creates, must have been impressed by the ingenuity and spontaneity with which the author was prepared to exemplify the meaning of his own words. But all at once on page 193 Alberto received a rude shock, for there in unanswerable black and white the sculptor found that the writer had summoned *him*, Giacometti, to become an integral, incredible part of the verbal architecture. This is what he read:

“More than twenty years ago, one evening while crossing the Place d’Italie, Giacometti was run down by a car. Wounded, his leg twisted, fallen into a lucid swoon, his first feeling was a kind of joy: ‘At last something is happening to me!’ I know his radicalism: he expected the worst; this life he loved so well that he would not have wanted any other was suddenly overturned, shattered perhaps, by the stupid violence of chance: ‘Consequently,’ he said to himself, ‘I was not made to be a sculptor, nor even to survive; I was not made for anything at all.’ What thrilled him was the menacing order of things abruptly unmasked, the petrifying look of a cataclysm fixed upon the lights of the city, upon other men, upon his own body flattened in the mud: for a sculptor the dominion of stone is ever close at hand. I admire such a will to welcome all things. If one likes surprises, one must like them to that degree, to the point of such rare bursts of brilliance as reveal to the illumined that the earth is not made for them.

“At the age of ten,” Sartre continued, “I presumed to like these only. Each link of my life had to be unexpected, to smell of fresh paint.” And so on for another twenty pages.

Giacometti was thunderstruck, as if, indeed, the petrifying look of a cataclysm had

transformed and unmasked the appearance and order of things. But he was not thrilled. He was appalled and infuriated, because the unanswerable summons of the writer struck him as unwarranted and unspeakable, struck him as a personal wound, and struck him precisely in the part of his life and his person that he would least have liked to see made public and, especially, made *wrong*. He himself, it is true, had repeatedly talked about the accident, and all of his friends had heard the story often, related with Alberto's inimitable flair for making the familiar details seem each time astonishingly new, and that was all very well, since it was his experience and his life. But here was Sartre, a man whose friendship dated almost from the time of the accident itself, taking the story without so much as a by-your-leave and falsifying it all for purposes purely his own. Everybody knew that the incident had occurred in the Place des Pyramides, not the Place d'Italie, which is miles away on the far side of the city, and nobody who knew Alberto at all could have supposed that his reaction to the accident might have led him to say to himself, "I was not made to be a sculptor, nor even to survive; I was not made for anything at all," when, in fact, his reaction had been almost exactly the reverse, and the accident had caused one of the profound, galvanic convulsions of his creative and personal life, a source of impulse and significance that defied analysis. Yet here was Sartre, with his writer's license, presuming to explain and shed light where none had ever been asked for, and doing so, moreover, not for any elucidation of Giacometti's being but solely to satisfy himself. It seemed an outrage, a failure of good faith. How could a man of good faith turn to his own account and distort for his own uses the vital ingredients of another's experience? How could good faith countenance the wanton flaunt of another man's life as a living lie? How could good faith find words to speak another's mind with thoughts as foreign to it as the planet Mars? Those were some of the questions that came to Giacometti as he pondered the provocative paragraph of the arbitrary auto-

biographer, and they are questions that must give painstaking pause to any author who would do justice to the experience of another human being. All the answers that occurred to Alberto were damning for Sartre, and the more he thought about them—and he thought about them incessantly—the angrier he became, so angry that he felt no choice was left to him but to consider dead a friendship, and trust, betrayed.

In the milieu they frequented news of Alberto's indignation naturally got back in a hurry to Sartre, who was surprised. He telephoned to the studio, but Giacometti, wary of ingenious ratiocination, had asked his brother to take incoming calls and refused to speak to the philosopher. The intervention of mutual friends was unavailing. "It's as if he had never known me!" Alberto exclaimed. "What's the good of knowing someone for twenty-five years if he hasn't understood the first thing about you?" He was adamant. Already before this he had been irritated by inaccuracies in the autobiography of the Beaver, and by her flippant dismissal of his objection, and now that Sartre was guilty of the same failing he wanted nothing more to do with them. Any suggestion that he might modify his intransigence met with renewed anger. The two men were never reconciled. They ran into each other once or twice, but the friendship was at an end.

Sartre never understood. Long ago the Beaver had facetiously remarked that he associated only with people who associated with him, and now one of those with whom association had been mutually most enriching and entertaining abruptly refused to associate with him at all. And for what reason? A trifling error of information or interpretation, a single paragraph. Regrettable, admittedly. But irreparable? The advocate of lucid reasoning was at a loss, and most confirmed, though confused, in his loss by the obstinate refusal of his former friend to submit the matter to the arbitration of reasonable discourse—to the dominion, that is, of words. Giacometti kept sternly, hence hostilely, aloof from any such step

toward reconciliation. How else, consequently, could the penitent, puzzled philosopher construe the whole business than as a peculiar failure of understanding on the part of the sculptor? To be in error, after all, was not the same thing as to be in the wrong, was it? And yet he knew full well what insidious intents can hide behind seeming accidents, and knew that the lover of words may also be their slave. Nonetheless he blamed the break on Giacometti, repeatedly saying after the artist's death that it was Alberto who had been guilty of misunderstanding and who had turned against him. And there he inadvertently allowed a glimpse, however oblique and fleeting, of a flaw in the edifice of intellect. By getting them all wrong he had shown how mean are mere facts unless illumined by comprehensive truth. By treading where angels fear to go the rash autobiographer had set foot on terrain too profound, too tragic, and too mysterious to be charted by the intellect alone, and his presence there imputed the sin of pride that puts knowledge before understanding and reason before feeling. If able to, Sartre would have been disposed to take the blame, for he was a well-meaning and kindly man. However, when asked a decade after Alberto's death how it was possible that he had situated in the Place d'Italie an event so famous for having occurred elsewhere, he shrugged and said, "Maybe it's because I've always felt a special fondness for the Place d'Italie," a reply which does, as one ponders it, shed

upon the landscape of that man's redoubtable intellect such a rare burst of brilliance as reveals to the illumined that the earth is not made for them.

Sartre was, as expected, awarded the Nobel Prize, and commentators widely assumed that *The Words* had counted for much in the decision of the Swedish Academy. But the philosopher would have none of it. He had already announced, when rumors of the impending honor started to swarm, that he would refuse it should it be offered. True to his word, he did. An explanation was published, stating that the author for personal reasons always had, and always would, refuse all honors, and that for ideological reasons the Nobel Prize in particular, being the most prestigious award in the world, was for him unacceptable. His statements were liked by almost nobody. Intellectuals of all stripes took him to task, each chastising him according to stripe, and even his Communist comrades, who had applauded him for denouncing the award to poor Pasternak, called his gesture neo-Stalinism, while hundreds of harrowing letters poured in from poor people who said that if Sartre could afford to turn up his nose at 250,000 kroner they had no such good fortune and would he have the human decency to send them the money he spurned. It was an awkward contretemps. But Sartre had been through many and he went his way as before, borne onward as upon an ocean by the ceaseless outpouring of his own words.

Poems *by Alan Shapiro, Donald Hall, & Brad Leithauser*

Vine

for Della

The previous tenants must have left it here
because it settled twisting up around
the trellis of the mullioned windows so
tenaciously they couldn't take it down;

they couldn't budge the huge pot on the floor
for all the tendrils rooted in the cracks
between the window and the window frame,
pressing their heart-shaped leaves against the glass.

So we could trace out every kind of weather:
a cross unyielding sun in the burned tips,
or shade no sun could break where deep green paled
and narrowed in a whitening eclipse.

Or days, like this day, when the early light
brings all out of doors into the waiting leaves
which suddenly have known no other time
than dwelling in this green light light receives.

—*Alan Shapiro*

Merle Slocum's .22

"I was twelve when my father gave me this .22 Mossberg carbine—hand-made, with a short octagonal barrel, stylish as an Indianfighter posing for a photograph. We ripped up Bokar coffeecans set into the sandbank by the track—competitive and companionable. He was a good shot, although his hands already trembled. Or I walked with my friend Paul who loved airplanes and wanted to be a pilot, and carried my rifle loosely, pointing it downward; I aimed at squirrels and missed. Later I shot woodchucks that ate my widowed mother's peas and Kentucky Wonders when I visited on weekends from college, or drove up from my Boston suburb, finding the gun in its closet behind the woodstove. Ten years ago my mother died; I sold up, and moved here with my work and my second wife, gladly taking my tenancy in the farmhouse where I intended to live and die. I was happy to come home; I used my .22 on another generation of woodchucks that ate cabbage, zucchini, and beans. One autumn an old friend from college stayed with us after a nervous breakdown: trembling from electroshock, depressed, suicidal. I wrapped the octagonal Mossberg in a burlap bag and concealed it under boards in the old grainshed. In our quiet house he strengthened and stopped shaking. When he went home I neglected to retrieve my gun, and the next summer woodchucks took over the garden. I let them. Our lives fitted mountain, creek, and hayfield. Long days like minnows in the pond quickened and were still. When I looked up from Plutarch another year had passed. One Sunday the choir at our church sang Whittier's hymn ending with 'the still small voice of calm.' Idly I thought, 'I must ask them to sing that one at my funeral.' Soon after, I looked for the .22 in the shed, half-expecting it to have vanished, but finding it wrapped intact where I left it, hardly rusted. I spent a long evening taking it apart and cleaning it, oiling it, loving the elegant rifle again;

I thought of my father's hands shaking as he aimed it.
Then I restored the Mossberg to its accustomed place
in the closet behind the stove. At about this time
I learned that my daughter-in-law was two months pregnant:
It would be the first grandchild. One day I was walking
alone and imagined a granddaughter visiting:
She loved the old place; she swam in the summer pond with us;
she walked with us in red October; she grew older, she fell
in love with a neighbor, she married As I daydreamed,
suddenly I was seized by a fit of revulsion:
I thought: 'Must I go through all that again? Must I live
another twenty years?' It was as if a body
rose from a hole where I had buried it years ago
while my first marriage was bleeding and thrashing to death.
One night I was drunk and lost control of my Beetle
off 128 near my ranchhouse. I missed a curve
at seventy miles an hour and careened toward a stone wall.
In a hundredth of a second I knew I would die;
and, as joy fired through my body, I knew something else.
But the car slowed itself on rocks and settled to rest
between an elm and a maple; I sat breathing,
feeling the joy leech out, leaving behind the torment
and terror of my desire. Decades later, abruptly,
in the house of contentment, I felt this affliction
descend again and metastasize through my body.
Today I drove ninety miles, slowly, seatbelt fastened,
to North Andover and Paul's house where he lives flying
out of Logan for United. I asked him to hide
the firing pin of an octagonal .22.
He nodded and took it from my hands without speaking.
I cannot throw it away; it was my father's gift."

—Donald Hall

At Greg's

Colder than snow

is how it feels, the year's first rain,
falling on a dark afternoon
the last week of January.

The neon signs

downtown already are blinking,
probably, patchily tinting
the hoods of cars, the ample crowns

of umbrellas

afloat on a washed-in clamor
of honks, whistles, shouts; but here,
upstairs in an old wooden house

five miles away

on the abrupt edge of Kyoto's eastern
line of hills, the darkness and the rain
alike come peacefully down.

It's an old house

that seems older as the rain falls,
rooting out from the walls
a resin whose power it is

to dim all signs—

the strings of dental floss, books
and sweat pants, empty donut box,
stubby pot-bellied hash pipe,

maps and wayworn

backpack—of the current
American tenant,
as if to restore this room to those

whose once it was . . .

This salvaging illusion (that it's
only time which separates
past from present, and the links still there

by which we might,

stooping, enter yet-simpler houses in
this former capital, old even then,
of a castled nation whose moat

was the salt sea

itself) is unshaken
by the click-clatter, as of wooden
shoes, of a tall schoolgirl, scooting

along, holding

an opened magazine over her hair,
or by sounds of a distant car,
groaning, as any horse would,

at the steepness

of the hill. The city's
fading, or falling, or folding inwards as,
moonlessly, the cold outspreads itself;

those streams running

freely in the streets will be locked
in ice tonight. It's difficult
not to view this weather

as anything

other than a deepening
tightening, a fiercer colder gripping
of the ground by winter . . . Only if

you close your eyes

as though about to sleep,
or in truth to sleep,
will the new year's first rain

perhaps summon

that long-gone and looked-for season
for which so many subterranean
spring-wound clocks are set; probably

only to those,

if any, at the shivering limit
of consciousness is it
evident how a colossal, exquisite

mathematical

accounting even now's in preparation,
a one-to-one correlation
whereby each raindrop's knocking shall

have its answer—

together when, then, under
some newly exploded sun, each tight blossom
opens like a door.

—*Brad Leithauser*

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Art and April in New York

by Jed Perl

What was happening in art in New York this spring? Downtown, the Grey Art Gallery at New York University offered "Precious," a show of whimsical, off-color, and overwhelmingly bejeweled paintings, sculptures, and in-between objects. "Precious" was about kitsch and trash; it was supposed to be a big transcendent joke at the expense of the banality of modern visual culture. But haven't the artists noticed it's been years since anyone with even half a brain laughed at or just thought about flocked wallpaper and Last Suppers painted on velvet? I knew my grandmother's taste was terrible when I was five years old; nowadays I pass her neo-Venetian coffeetable with its top of fake stones embedded in lucite without a snort. It could have starred in "Precious." Comedians know subjects have to change with the times. Why not artists?

Nothing in the "Precious" show got a rise. Beneath the tinsel and cosmetic-bright color the new kitsch hid a cold heart: this was cool kitsch. The photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's flocked, green- and purple-toned backside of a black male nude couldn't even be called deadpan—the image died before conception. Much was made by Grace Glueck in a *New York Times* review of the religious motifs in this show: all the saints and reliquaries and icons and shrines. I don't know whether the artists who've adopted religious themes take their religion seriously or not; I expect some do and some don't. But this isn't really the issue, since

none of them can convey a feeling, whether of reverence or irreverence.

Good art can be made by simply pointing at things; or by taking them to heart, letting them get under your skin. The problem is, at "Precious" the artists wouldn't know one attitude from the other. The work is without affect. It's art in which the artists are impersonal—absent. If you say a word over and over again to yourself it will eventually lose its meaning. The art world seems to be doing this in spades. "Glitzy," "cartoony" are applied in so many contexts that no one can finally determine if they're characterizations, or compliments, or insults. All the shadings are lost. Thomas W. Sokolowski, who organized "Precious," opens his catalogue essay with three epigrams, among them a line from St. Clement of Alexandria. Sokolowski's neo-Catholicism brings to mind Ronald Firbank, the English master of High Camp Catholicism, whose weird novella, *The Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli*, has the off-center quality one misses at "Precious"—both in the show and in the catalogue. A line from *Cardinal Pirelli* will give the Firbank flavor: "'His hat!' Monseigneur Silex exclaimed aloud, blinking a little at the immemorial font of black Macael marble that had provoked the screams of pale numberless babies."

The Grey Gallery "Precious" was *faux-précieux*—or just plain fake. This spring's real precious show was "The Treasury of San Marco Venice," uptown at the Metro-

politan. The absurdly underlit, haut-chic Italian disco decor, and the postmodern display cases, out of some futuristic Milanese shop, were as bad as any installation the Met has ever done. But the objects were wondrous. The chalices, reliquaries, and bookcovers were tidal deposits off the shores of world history. Many are early Christian remakes of pagan things: a cup turned into a chalice, pagan carvings in semi-precious stone turned to Catholic use. Particularly tasty was a rock-crystal grotto, said to be from the fourth or fifth century; it is turned upside down, mounted on a ninth- or tenth-century votive crown, and made to function as the base for a thirteenth-century statue of the Virgin. The where or why of this structure no one is quite clear on. The treasures of San Marco are deluxe found objects. The gold is real, and so is the emotion.

Not far from the Met, at the Whitney Biennial, there was little to note save the homogeneity of it all. Kenny Scharf's spray paint and mixed media decoration of the second-floor bathrooms marked the apex or nadir—but of what? I'll be damned if I know. Horror vacui and bright color were Biennial favorites: compelling in Carroll Dunham's abstractions, uninteresting most everywhere else.

On the main floor of the Whitney, as part of the Biennial, there was a room-sized parody of a suburban community-center art show called *Americana*; it was assembled by the four-member environmental art team, Group Material. Against walls papered in the sorts of patterns no self-respecting museumgoer would be caught dead with at home. Group Material hung a mixture of pictures by Lower East Side celebrities and genuine schlock art—the paintings sold around Forty-second Street in stores with perpetual "Going Out of Business Sale"

signs, and the more expensive type which Leroy Neiman produces. The wall labels were handwritten, as if for a show in the corridor of a hospital or a branch bank. This was parody out-parodied, and everything canceled out. This year it's all in the installation; art as mis-en-scène. One goes to most galleries as a sociologist.

Eric Fischl—represented at the Whitney by two of his essays in the unpleasantness of modern family life—is an awkward artist whose much talked about show last fall was interesting only as the moment when a bad imitation of Philip Pearlstein's feeling for form and Paul Georges's feeling for paint made it into the big white box of Mary Boone's gallery.

Yes, there are good artists, but they labor mostly in obscurity. A few years ago I was met with incredulity when among a panel of critics I said that today a great many important artists are pretty much unknown. These days it's fashionable to call the misunderstood, overlooked artist a Romantic myth. Of course, no one ever wanted *not* to be famous; all artists want their work seen and bought and loved. It's not that one would deny Julian Schnabel his loft and big prices; it's just that so many better artists can't get a review or sell anything. In art, fame and quality have no particular relation. How much more famous were Cabanel and Bouguereau than Cézanne! I doubt it's much different today.

Still, no need to despair. When you leave the Grey Art Gallery in April you see the trees in Washington Square Park glorious with their first film of green. I once heard an artist say that the color of early spring was like the gentle glazes in a Titian. You feel this in New York in April. And on a really good spring day you walk—as Fairfield Porter was fond of saying—through streets bathed in the most beautiful light in the world.

Expressionisms

by *Eric Gibson*

The three-gallery Francesco Clemente exhibition in April was one of those events—so frequent on the art scene today—that strikes one as having more to do with commerce than with art. The Mary Boone, Leo Castelli (Greene Street), and Sperone Westwater Fischer galleries were filled with the recent work of this Italian painter, but the effect of the exhibition was not primarily an aesthetic one. For it gave the artist's dealers an opportunity to make a statement about the current art market and what they viewed as Clemente's place in it. Clearly they regard him as the hottest property around and are determined to make the most of it.

Needless to say, the hoopla surrounding an event of this kind is such that it is the event itself, rather than the art it contains, that everyone pays attention to. What the public comes to look at is not paint on canvas but the dealers' idea of how to seize the commercial initiative and push an artist (and themselves) ahead of the competition—to maintain the artist's position of pre-eminence and perhaps the dealers' too. This, after all, is the rationale of the multi-space exhibition. It is not designed to reveal the artist so much as to achieve overnight what took years of careful work, exhibiting, and critical discussion: the establishment of the artist's special place among his peers. And, as with everything else, inflation has caught up with the price of promotion. Where a show in a single major gallery was once enough to attract discerning attention, it

now takes two galleries, even three, to do the job.

This kind of creative marketing worked to the advantage of the artist on this occasion, but not in the way one might have expected. It saved the artist from himself. Dazzled by the hoopla and the profusion of work, and mindful of the stamina required to get through it all, the viewer was more than likely distracted from the limitations of the work itself. When faced with quantity and the groundswell of preformed public opinion, the impulse to pay close attention tends to diminish. The exhibition becomes a spectacle.

Just as well in this case. For Clemente is very much a Johnny one-note as far as pictorial themes go, returning again and again to a watery recycling of existential and end-of-the-world *Angst*; moreover, such themes are couched in not very potent dream imagery, wherein sexual organs and sexual acts are featured repeatedly and tediously. Unlike his compatriot Sandro Chia—another so-called neo-Expressionist—Clemente does not reward us for our labors with an occasional image of power or authority. Nor is there a technique to admire. At least when Chia is at his worst—mawkish, cloying, or downright corny, as one occasionally saw him to be at his exhibition last winter at Leo Castelli's gallery on West Broadway—one can draw some measure of satisfaction from his handling of paint. No such interest is possible with Clemente.

What strengths Clemente does manifest were evident mainly in his drawings, dozens of which, all small, crowded one wall at Mary Boone. While in general there is little bite to his line, the first two drawings on that wall really did stand out. One was an image of a leaping figure, the upper half of whose body was a curling, tapering stalk. The second depicted a figure so elongated at the waist that his middle section stretched between his top and bottom halves (and the right and left extremes of the sheet) like a rainbow. Executed in ink wash, they were striking images, ingenuous and fantastic, with just a slight note of unease.

It is this sort of image, I believe, that forms the center of Clemente's sensibility, but one can feel him getting further and further away from it as his pictures get more "ambitious," which is to say bigger. Overloaded with self-consciousness, received ideas, pseudo-seriousness, and pictorial complexity of a not very high order, these over-scale paintings are devoid of those qualities—delicate ones—that give his art whatever strength it has.

On the wall opposite the drawings at Mary Boone was a row of medium-sized pastels. One of them shows a couple making love in a cave beneath a sky filled with oversized, looming spheres. It is, of course, another apocalyptic image—a couple engaging in a final, life-affirming act in total security and innocence before discovery and extinction. As such, there is nothing terribly original about it. Nonetheless it does have a certain poignancy, which derives, I think, from its tone of ingenuousness. And, once again, the scale is small. Compare it with the vast rockscape with miniature ratchet wheels that was on view at Sperone, or the (even larger) painting at Castelli of a tiny figure running into a labyrinth of what appears to be furniture molding, and one sees clearly enough what has been lost with the increase in size.

The visitor leaves this vast pictorial parade exhausted and irritated at the demands made upon his attention for so little reward. Yet mixed in with this irritation is a touch of sadness at what has been done to the artist in

this event. It requires a talent of considerable size to live up to the lavish claims underlying such an oversized installation. Clemente is not up to it, but is it entirely his fault? Why not avoid such a debacle and restrict an exhibition to those (few) pictures of real strength?

The answer, clearly, lies in the irresistible siren song of the marketplace, and the increasingly divergent interests of aesthetics and commerce. In the old days an artist's career was carefully nurtured by his dealer, his star allowed to rise only gradually in order to assure stability and staying power. In the current climate of instant gratification, however, the emphasis is on the present only, the aim being to secure as rapidly as possible the largest share of the market. Meanwhile, at the center of all this stands the artist, aesthetically overextended, his prices at a peak, and the market nearly saturated with his work. A show of this kind is, in the end, a terrible disservice to an artist, particularly one of such slender abilities as Clemente. But does anyone care?

A vision of a very different order is to be seen in the paintings of Albert York that were shown at Davis & Langdale. York belongs to the group of painterly realists from Long Island which includes, among others, Jane Freilicher and the late Fairfield Porter. But York differs from them in important ways. While embracing similar subject matter—still lifes, landscapes, figure and animal paintings—his worldview is more contained. A still life for York is one or two flowers in a makeshift vase, and a landscape a very localized affair. But it is his differences in tone that really set him off from the others, most of all the reticence and intensity of his vision.

For all their apparent ease and painterliness, York's paintings show an emphatic fear of excess. We are aware of a desire to render the subjects fully, yet without the slightest overstatement, as if to overstate were to fatally disturb the hard-won balance between the worlds of art and nature, to tip that balance too visibly in the direction of

art, and thus of rhetoric. At the same time, one senses in York's paintings an equally powerful need to "keep it alive," to avoid the kind of excessive caution that can leave an image looking timid or ossified. The result is an admirable synthesis of fluidity and specificity in his handling.

York's paintings are small—rarely more than twelve inches square—and all are bounded by identical wide black frames. The point of view is invariably close-up, even in the landscapes; they fill the canvas to the frame edge. This gives his subjects an air of laboratory isolation. Thus, the way the paintings fill the frame, the manner of framing, and the very size of the paintings are all ways for York to secure his subjects, detaching them from the surrounding world and concentrating his and our attention on them. The resulting proximity and focus confer upon his pictures a concentration and power unusual in painting of this kind.

In his still lifes, York presents a vision of nature in which the emotional impact of the subject is expressed through the manipulation of paint alone. Yet this may make him sound like more of an expressionist than he actually is. For his expressionism—if that is what it can be called—derives precisely from his distrust of the abandon that is central to the idea of expressionism in our time. There is nothing in the least "abandoned" about these paintings; all are carefully, painstakingly controlled. York seems eager to reinvent for himself the expressionist stroke, choosing to do so by moving in the direction of Chinese brush painting, in which each mark represents the essence both of the subject being depicted and of all possible ways of depicting it. In *White Roses in a Glass Jar* (1968), for example, every stroke of every petal is invested with the weight of unrelenting probing of inner and outer worlds. York's lighting plays a part in this process. So brilliant that it suggests at times something close to a glare, this lighting lets no detail escape the eye. The brilliance becomes, besides an agent of revelation, the standard against which the artist measures himself. Small wonder that Susan Rothen-

berg, who in her semi-abstract images of horses manifests a similarly controlled expressionism, chose York's work when she was asked to make a selection for the "Artists Choose Artists" exhibition last summer at the CDS gallery. Few painters of expressionist stripe bring such passion or rigor to their work.

In his landscapes—views of three or more trees set in open ground, occasionally with a pond visible in the background—York departs still further from his Long Island confiners, defying the expansiveness, locality, luminescence, and even mood of their paintings. In these landscapes, York attempts something paradoxical, and the result is what one might call intimate landscape. Far from seeking to open up vistas, he closes them down, delimiting space, reducing it and the motif to a small, controllable scale. We are given a landscape, but no clear sense of where it might be. Mood and luminescence are likewise controlled, being held in check by a certain Yankee matter-of-factness that likes a tree to be a tree and little else. There is only the most discreet measure of the kind of delight in the fullness and brilliance of the outdoors that infuses so much of Fairfield Porter's work. Yet York is far from niggardly in the feeling he tenders: he simply wants to get his priorities in the right order.

One senses in this process of constriction a desire to adjust the motif to the limits of natural credibility, to move and place these trees in such a way as to achieve an ideal presence, an intimacy, without making them look forced or aesthetically dead. It represents a striving for balance between natural truth and pictorial necessity that one sees elsewhere, for example, in Hobbema's *Avenue at Middelharnis* (1689), a Dutch painting wherein one-point perspective and Dutch naturalism are joined in a view down a tree-lined avenue.

As with his still lifes, it is the individual object that interests York. Yet he communicates a sense of the larger environment through a restricted luminescence and a stroke more closely blended than the one

he uses in his still lifes. Typical, in this respect, is *Edge of the Forest* (1963), an almost Barbizon-like picture in which form, space, and terrain are differentiated not by stroke but by shades of green and varying intensities of natural light. Characteristically, York avoids any of the overtones to which a painting of this kind is so susceptible. Instead, he personalizes his observation of this small patch of territory, making it an inquiry into exactly where one thing ends and another begins. It is a picture in which we see brought to bear upon the unruliness and ambiguity of nature a certain logic of mind and innocent curiosity. And in paintings like this York's intimate landscape achieves its zenith.

An opposite sort of expansiveness, with an equal measure of control, was visible in the work of Gregory Amenoff shown at the Robert Miller Gallery. Amenoff's expansiveness is as much of mind as it is of manner, for his paintings, large in size, derive not from direct observation of nature but from imagination. Like York's, however, they are "about" nature and landscape. Yet Amenoff's is a visionary sensibility, and his pictures derive their vitality from the felt rhythms and processes underlying nature's visible surfaces.

These are paintings founded on a familiar paradox: that it is possible to evoke nature without resort to naturalistic motifs, to suggest narrative without depicting actions or events. Forms of an organic character appear to be engaged in an act of nudging, abutting, and swirling, or else they are positioned in a precise, tense standoff. In the largest picture, *Gordian Knot*, we seem to be witnessing a sub-microscopic heaving and swelling as forms shift, momentarily frozen in a languorous dance. The world of observable things feels quite distant here, even though the painting ultimately returns to it. And Amenoff has succeeded in yet another paradox: creating a world at once hermetic and expansive—hermetic in its isolation and autonomy, expansive in its scale and sense of endless unfolding.

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Comparisons with the work of Bill Jensen inevitably come to mind; the two share organic imagery which is simultaneously abstract and anthropomorphic. But Amenoff's paintings are not only far larger than Jensen's—being at their smallest four feet square where Jensen's are little more than eighteen inches to a side—they are more variegated. He avoids the centralized image favored by Jensen, using instead more diverse and complex groupings of forms. And, where Amenoff's paintings give us an easy, fluid, continuum, Jensen's are more baroque, possessing an almost pyrotechnic quality.

The absence of gravity is central to the creation of Amenoff's pictorial environment. It frees it from the normal condition of the everyday world and locates his images squarely in the realm of the imagination. It is this that gives his pictures their visionary

quality, this and the use of light and three-dimensional illusion, which jointly offer us our only concrete link to the world as we know it.

Amenoff's achievement in these paintings is to have reintroduced narrative as an abstract idiom. He shows how vital abstract painting can become when a painter departs from established conventions and breathes another kind of life into it. By using only those aspects of the modernist aesthetic he finds useful—its abstraction, its scale, and its painterly emphasis on its own materials—and by reintroducing, albeit obliquely, the formerly proscribed elements of narrative, allusion, light, and space, Amenoff has applied his visionary sensibility to extend the range of abstract painting in a way few other painters on the current scene have been able to do.

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The comic dance

by Mimi Kramer

The audience at the Neil Simon Theatre really was having an awfully good time. Scarcely a line of *Biloxi Blues* had gone by without eliciting a wave of appreciative laughter or applause. For my part, I sat beside my friend who has a soft spot for Neil Simon, feeling like a killjoy and a snob, wishing that I could find some shred of honesty or wit or breadth of comic vision in this play that seemed to be making everyone else so warm and jolly.

I did eventually double up with laughter, once, late in the play. A hush had fallen on the audience. It was a tense moment: some unidentified member of the platoon had been discovered committing an unnatural sexual act in the latrine. Perched on his footlocker, smoothing down the pages of his journal, Eugene M. Jerome—the hero of Neil Simon’s play—looked troubled. Above him, on an upper bunk sat Arnold Epstein, the brilliant but self-destructive Jew who was always getting racial flak from his commanding officer and bunkmates.

A terrible thing had happened: Eugene’s private notebook—in which he wrote down all his secret thoughts and feelings in preparation for becoming a writer—had been found and read by his bunkmates, which was awkward in itself, for now each one knew exactly what Eugene thought of him. But also—which was far, far worse—everyone now also knew that Arnold was probably a homosexual, for in his memoirs Eugene had recorded suspicions to that effect. Eugene

hadn’t meant to hurt his friend; he’d really just been testing out his *own* feelings—“. . . and it bothers me that it bothers me,” he’d written. But now it looked as if Arnold might have to face dishonorable discharge and possibly even imprisonment.

So, as I say, it was a tense moment there in the Neil Simon Theatre as Eugene M. Jerome began slowly and deliberately, to tear the incriminating page from his book and crumple it into a ball. Arnold, of course, objected. “Once you start compromising your thoughts, you’re a candidate,” he warned, “for mediocrity!” And from my friend beside me came the whisper of a sigh: “Ah! So that’s how it happened!” he said.

Biloxi Blues is the second play in Neil Simon’s steadily emerging autobiographical trilogy. If it seems marginally less tiresome than the first, that is possibly because it is shorter. Like *Brighton Beach Memoirs* it is intended as a fictionalized account of Simon’s youth and coming of age as a writer, and this second installment takes its hero from the comparative safety of the family battleground in Brooklyn—depicted in such generous detail in *Brighton Beach*—and thrusts him out into the cold, harsh world of Basic Training during World War II. The action of the play centers around a barracks room in which Eugene and five other raw recruits will learn to become men. It is a time-honored situation and one that’s usually fairly popular with me. You put six wisecracking guys together in an army barracks and I am

easily entertained—alarmingly so: I laugh, I cry, I think about taking up the ocarina. The surprising thing about *Biloxi Blues* is that it fails so consistently to be like anything even remotely resembling entertainment—in spite of the surefire, “all army lads together” set-up, in spite of every old, familiar topos.

There is the sadistic drill sergeant who proves, ironically, to care most deeply about the soldier he has always humiliated the most; and at the end of the play his men discover—imagine!—that they miss him. There is the requisite encounter with a gold-hearted whore, one of those endless *rite de passage* sequences in which loss of virginity seems to become less a ritual than a whole religion. There is the predictable romance between our Jewish hero and—guess what?—a Catholic girl, who, as the hero tells us at the end, will wind up marrying (of all things) a Jewish doctor! There is even one of those “what-would-you-want-to-have-done-if-you-knew-that-you-weren’t-coming-back-from-the-war” conversations, a game played late one night in the barracks. The device is so familiar that when, sure enough, the “and-this-is-what-happened-to-all-of-them” speech comes along, seconds before the final curtain, nothing the hero could tell us about the fates of Epstein, Selridge, Carney, Hennesey, and Wykowsky could possibly hope to impress. It is like the knock-knock joke: the possible answers are so limited and the differences between them so small as to make the riddle hardly worth asking.

Of course, predictability need not be an impediment to successful comedy: whole comic genres are built on an audience’s ability to guess wincingly at what is bound to happen next—slapstick, farce, and situation comedy, for instance. One knows that the piano will roll back down the steps no matter how many times Laurel and Hardy push it back up; one knows that the irate, bearded man in a walking cast will get his foot caught in a revolving door. The existence of the revolving door is predicated by the presence of the walking cast: that is precisely why one laughs. *If* one laughs, that is—for

how much pleasure one derives from the certain knowledge of what will happen and from watching it happen varies, of course, from person to person, as does the question of which foreseeable events have the capacity to make us laugh.

Which accounts for the chilling evening you once spent sitting in stony silence at a British sex farce, wondering why everyone else around was shrieking with laughter and why the husband didn’t just throw the shipment of pornographic photos into the wastebasket before the mother-in-law arrived. It accounts for that time you were the only person in a crowded movie theater who laughed and couldn’t stop laughing when the midget fell out of a second-story window and landed in a garbage can. What “low” comedy relies on is the tension between the chaos being created by whatever violence, mess, or mix-up constitutes the joke and the promise of order implicit in the exigencies of the genre: the knowledge that the midget *will* fall out of the window and that something silly will be there to catch him when he does; the knowledge that the wife *will* mistake the identical twin brother for her husband and the master end up beating the wrong slave.

Situation comedy differs slightly from slapstick and farce because it has a moral interest farce and slapstick do not share. A hybrid genre, it partakes of “high” and “low” comic elements both. In situation comedy, as in farce and slapstick, a good deal of the entertainment value is lodged in predictability: one knows, for instance, that if the temperamental bus driver in “The Honeymooners” has his eye on a promotion, his friend the self-effacing sewage man is sure to be offered the job. The predictable element in situation comedy, however, is nearly always located in the same place, the tendency of certain characters to make the same assumptions and mistakes over and over again because of some personality trait or habit of mind that dictates and controls their actions. Thus, our ability to guess the outcome of an episode of “The Honeymooners” derives in part from the fact that

the character played by Jackie Gleason will always lack a knowledge of his own limitations and an ability to assess the true worth of his friend. The mechanism of predictability in situation comedy may derive from the same school that farce and slapstick belong to; the predictable character himself, however, is a legacy from a different variety of comedy altogether.

So far as it is possible to trace the origins of comedy—which isn't very far at all—most things that make us laugh in a theater come down to us from two literary forms which the Romans called Old and New comedy. The plays of Aristophanes are the only surviving example of the former, which makes it hard to reconstruct the genre, but from what ancient and medieval literary critics complain of in Old Comedy—and they took a very dim view of it—it seems possible to infer that it tended to concern itself with public or abstract issues (war, for instance, or the decline of quality in theater); that the plot usually arose from a general state of affairs rather than a specific situation (e.g., “playwrights just aren't writing any good stuff anymore . . .”) and generally took the form of an unrealistic or fantastical endeavor (“ . . . so we will simply have to bring back one of the dead playwrights”); that for comic devices it relied chiefly on what we tend to think of as “low” humor; and that its targets were primarily specific, familiar individuals—gods, heroes or well-known personalities—who became laughable because the play showed them in an undignified light.

New Comedy changed all that. Instead of concentrating on a recognizable figure whose actions were funny because of who he was, it found another object of ridicule: the generic character who made us laugh because he represented a particular human failing, common enough to be identifiable and exaggerated enough to be openly absurd. It invented a new plot as well, one that has never left us. It had to do with a boy and girl who wanted to get together but couldn't because of something standing in their way. Perhaps someone else—some dreadful old

man—had first dibs on the girl, or else she was a slave, sometimes both. The old man was generally a pretty important person, sometimes the hero's own father—which wasn't very nice, since he already *had* a wife, the hero's mother—and in addition to having some highly objectionable personality traits, had power and connections as well. Fortunately, though, the hero had a sidekick who was significantly brighter than he was himself—usually someone who stood outside of the prevailing social unit, like a slave—and the “tricky” slave always found some way of cheating the old man so that the play could end in marriage and a celebratory dance.

Boy meets girl; boy loses girl; boy gets girl. From Menander and Plautus through Molière, the English Restoration, the drawing room, the world of Preston Sturges, and the Broadway musical, comedy runs a pretty straight course. It is important to note, however, that if New Comedy sought to re-establish order where Old Comedy had been content to generate chaos, the order imposed on the world of comedy by the final resolution was never quite the same as the one we'd started out with. The hero had got his girl; age had been overthrown and folly exposed; moreover, in those characters whose singleness of purpose, interest, or desire had been an obstruction to the lovers—the miser, the braggart, the grouch—the action of the play had usually wrought some gradual conversion. That was the important thing about New Comedy: people changed. What situation comedy took from New Comedy was the “humor” figure—the character whose words and actions are predictable because they are governed by what the Elizabethans called a “humor” and what the psychoanalysts call “repetition compulsion.” But from that “lower,” more venerable, strain of laughter, it took the stipulation that the “humor” character could never, ever change.

The fundamental problem with *Biloxi Blues*, it seems to me, is that Neil Simon is trying to mix and blend two different comic genres, one of which is already an ingredient

of the other. All of the basic elements of his plot are really the stuff of situation comedy. The six men in a barracks, the Jewish-boy-and-Catholic-girl romance, the conflict between the macho officer and intellectual private, the boy who longs to become a writer and leave virginity behind: all of them are really only capable of interesting us by remaining in suspension. The conflicts they propose are not deep or complex enough to pique our curiosity about where they will end. For where can they possibly go? The soldiers will go off to war, the lovers will kiss and part, the private and officer will come to terms, and the boy (if you'll forgive me) will get laid. But because Simon wants his play to go somewhere, because he wants it to be more "serious" than a situation comedy, he has raised the deadly specter of resolution turning each little setup into a *petit drame*. As for the one question Simon actually leaves unanswered—will young Gene ever become a writer—it is the most fatuous and ill-advised. There has to be an awful lot else going on in a work of literature in order for it to ask a question to which it is, itself, the answer. Neil Simon is simply asking for a cheap shot there.

The people who had come to see Joseph Dougherty's play *Digby* were having the time of their lives; to judge by the timbre and frequency of the laughter, they hadn't enjoyed anything quite so much in years. For my part, I sat in the Manhattan Theatre Club's new space at City Center feeling like the Malcontent again, wondering why this harmless and amusing comedy was making me so cross.

I figured it out, too, early in the play. A hush had fallen on the audience. It was a tense moment: Digby had come to collect Faye from her lover's apartment—or *one* of her lovers, rather, for Faye had lovers the way some women have charge cards. This was Nelson, the tall, laid-back, dude with sculpted, two-tone hair who flashed slides from pornographic magazines up on a canvas, traced them with a crayon, and called himself an artist. Faye was offstage getting

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dressed and Nelson, left onstage alone with Digby, was getting mean. "Peachy keen!" he'd said with biting sarcasm on hearing that Digby's plan for the evening was to take Faye to Fireworks Night at Shea Stadium.

Poor Digby really did look rather foolish standing there in his faded jeans and blue-and-orange Mets jacket; but we liked Digby: he had funny, old-fashioned notions (like that people didn't *have* to sleep together on a first date) and he had a weakness for lost causes (like old-fashioned notions and the Mets). Also, Digby really had respect for women: when talking about them, he didn't use expressions like "hump her," and "pork her," and "get laid" the way his friend Harry did. The way most of the men in the play did, in fact. Even Nelson, for instance, had just warned Digby that Faye was "hardly uncontested territory!" and Digby looked pretty mad, so it was a tense moment as we waited for his reply. Then, quite calmly and with just the slightest edge to his voice, Digby explained to Nelson that he himself was not actually sleeping with Faye—not that it was any of Nelson's business. He added: "But I want it very clearly understood that I have nothing whatsoever in *common* with you." Nelson looked stricken, and from the audience came that sound halfway between a laugh and a sigh of contentment that one sometimes hears when somebody has just come up with a really good line.

Joseph Dougherty's play about an independent-minded advertising copywriter who yearns to rise above the sexual mores of his generation was everybody's second favorite comedy this season—after *Biloxi Blues*. A good deal of its popularity may be due to the charm and charisma of Anthony Heald, the actor playing "Digby," who transformed Dougherty's rather priggish and pontificating hero into a figure of warmth and appeal. Mr. Heald, whose salient characteristics as a performer are modesty and mirth, may be remembered from last summer's Central Park production of *Henry V* as the actor who, in the comparatively minor comic role of Fluellen, unwittingly stole the show from Kevin Kline. Heald's strength as a comic

actor lies in his refusal to acknowledge to the audience a sense of his own burlesque. When he is being funny, a sort of screen comes down between himself and the audience on which he seems to project the outward semblance of a wide-eyed inability to believe that anyone in the world would ever laugh at him. And so, of course, we do.

What Heald has is that rare capacity for playing a character at once from his own point of view and *not* from his own point of view, a technique that proves particularly effective in its application to the kinds of roles the actor seems to specialize in; for most of the parts that Anthony Heald has recently performed off-Broadway happen to be "humor" characters of one sort or another and the one thing all "humor" characters have in common is a monumental lack of self-knowledge—that inability to imagine that anything about them could appear odd or entertaining. The pedantic Fluellen, the accident-prone schoolteacher in Simon Gray's *Quartermaine's Terms*, the pathologically dull Englishman in Larry Shue's *The Foreigner*, even the genial academic in Christopher Hampton's *The Philanthropist*: all were essentially characters of comic excess, and in each case the brittle surface of Heald's counterfeit obliviousness allowed him to create a character and comment on that character at the same time.

Alone perhaps among the roles that Heald has recently performed the hero of *Digby* is not primarily a figure of fun. Oh, he's amusing, all right: he's always saying sharp, surprising things (like that rooting for the Yankees is "like rooting for the phone company") and sarcasm is his dominant mode: "Women make up fifty-one percent of the population," he tells his randy friend Harry. "What do you think they're all doing out there? Trading lipsticks and waiting for you to make your move?" True, he's a bit comical pacing around his office, talking back to the Mets game on the radio. But the laughter Digby provokes is primarily that of love rather than ridicule; he is more seductive than he is absurd, so when Digby vows to prove that an old-fashioned, sexless court-

ship is still possible between a man and a woman living in Sin City in the 1980s, and when soon after he meets innocently promiscuous Faye, the foxiest girl in town (Roxanne Hart), we want him to get his girl the good old-fashioned way, just like in the old movies.

The critics who seemed to be charmed by *Digby*—Frank Rich, John Simon, Edith Oliver, and Clive Barnes among them—were none of them blind to its literary and dramatic weaknesses. For the most part, they admitted that it wasn't polished or subtle writing; on the whole, they agreed that it was superficial and formulaic stuff; and most of them pointed out that all of the characters except the hero were merely caricatures. Still, all of them seemed to wish the play well and wrote about it with warm good humor as a flawed but valiant crack at a genre that no one's attempted for years: the good old-fashioned romantic comedy.

Actually, the only "old-fashioned" thing about *Digby* is the worldview it tries to promote like a classic scent from Estée Lauder: the neo-liberal/bright-young-conservative values and opinions that its hero wears as recognizably as he might wear a seersucker suit. Digby doesn't actually come out and tell anyone how to vote or where to stand on the defense question, but he gives the author a chance to vent his spleen on every foolish or regrettable aspect of the world we live in and the permissive society that produced it: from disco and post-"punk" fashion to suggestive jeans commercials and performance art. "Look around you, Faye!" Digby exclaims. "There are mannequins *screwing* in the windows of Bloomingdale's! . . . Everywhere we see sex masquerading as intimacy. It's become the thing people do when they don't know what else to do!" Through Digby, Dougherty mourns the disappearance from our social commerce of polite conversation and its replacement by routine confession. "Honesty is a rather inflated commodity these days, don't you think?" suggests Dougherty alias Digby. "People are so busy being frank and honest with each other, nobody has any time left for simple politeness!"

Social conventions are not the only thing that Digby/Dougherty moralizes about. He is saddened by the spectacle of Nelson's paintings. Faye thinks they "kick you in the teeth and rattle convention." But Digby is unimpressed. "And then what?" he asks, leaving Faye dumbfounded. Digby's utterances are always leaving someone dumbfounded, no matter how feeble they are. And no matter how familiar the form and substance of his rhetoric, its passion is always leaving someone close to tears. Faye is deeply moved by Digby's baseball anecdote. Good God, we all are! You know the story: about that first time Dad took me to a ballgame and they started to play the National Anthem, only the PA-system went dead:

. . . but the people kept on singing . . . I started to cry. Standing beside my father in the midst of all those softly singing people, I just wanted them to go on singing. But they didn't. They couldn't.

Digby's real complaint about the 1980s is that they stopped singing the National Anthem. And Dougherty, by relegating Digby's old-world values to the forgotten kingdom of lost causes, by equating the "help-yourself" mentality of Digby's peers with the "go-for-it" ethos of the advertising world, by consistently giving Digby the winning line in any verbal contest and particularly by crowning his attitude toward women with a halo of more-right-thinking-than-thou virtue, gradually builds his case for conservatism until we are wondering why his hero is churning out advertising copy instead of working on the staff of *The National Review*.

That Dougherty wants to illustrate the moral generosity of Digby's woman-as-chum-and-intellectual-companion ideals is clear and he is at pains to contrast it with the fundamentally exploitive hypocrisy he discovers in the New Morality (as in the scene in which Digby's business associates, assuming that he has "scored" with Faye, celebrate his "conquest" in shockingly crude terms and end up telling racist jokes.) But the play-

wright is the real hypocrite here, for it is Dougherty who turns the character of Faye into a largely charmless and utterly brainless vessel of desire and desirability, a sort of lust machine given to undulating in place, parrotting Digby's views on baseball and lisping out pronouncements like: "'You improve experience with your presence.' I read that somewhere. 'You coalesce reality.'" The real problem with *Digby*, though, is not its hero's or its author's views of women and the world but the use to which Joseph Dougherty is putting the views of each.

There is a case to be made for the innate conservatism of comedy as a generic form—but not on the basis of any specific values it espouses. That comedy has an inherently conservative streak is arguable, for example, on the basis of certain assumptions that it makes about how man is best to fulfill his moral function, his condition as man. In going to answer this question, comedy assumes that the individual has to adapt to the world, not the other way around. This is, by definition, a conservative assumption. The world, says comedy, with all its injustices and imperfections, is here to stay—and in pretty much the form in which we find it. In "moral" comedy, therefore, the character who seeks to change the world will come to grief before he comes to laughter and the Malcontent, unable to find a place to stand up in the comic dance, will go offstage (like Malvolio) muttering vengeance and imprecations. But comedy has also a subversive streak—and always has had. Typically, the comic resolution came from that figure outside of the little circle whose plight we were preeminently concerned with—the slave—and the conflict he helped to resolve (like his own relation to that society) had arisen from society's very imperfections and the injustices it tolerated: the lecherous old man had a perfect *right* to the girl the young man wanted; that was the whole problem.

Now you can, in modern terms, present a view of society that says, "Subscribe: it's better to be rich and powerful," and still wind up with comedy that is in some sense "moral." Philip Barry's *Philadelphia Story*

does this. Although the heroine ends up marrying the right millionaire rather than the wrong millionaire because of the intrusion of a pair of simple, unpretentious journalists who are out of place on the family estate, the man she marries is every bit as much a part of her father's world as the stuffy, pompous fellow to whom she was engaged at the beginning.

You can, by the same token, present a view of society that says, "Get out of it: it's better to be free!" Philip Barry's *Holiday* does this. Because of the intrusion of the zany, academic couple that doesn't fit in at white-tie parties on Fifth Avenue, the hero goes off to make his way through the world with the right girl rather than with her cold, shallow sister who wants him to stop turning cartwheels in the corridor and take a job at Daddy's bank.

You can even confuse everybody by making your subversive element a character of power and influence—an eccentric millionaire, a "Weenie king," as Preston Sturges does in *Palm Beach Story*. What you cannot do and still wind up with "moral" comedy is make a character of comic excess the mouthpiece for a moral standard, which is precisely what Dougherty is trying to do in *Digby*.

Digby Merton is "astonished at the sexual dysfunctions and aberrations that a man can be labeled with simply because he chooses to abstain!" Well comedy is full of people who claim, like Digby, to seek some shelter from the way of the world in abstinence or celibacy: Shaw's Jack Tanner, Molière's Alceste and Tartuffe, and any number of characters in Shakespeare. But the young King who vows at the beginning of *Love's Labour's Lost* to forswear the company of women finds himself absurdly easily forsworn. Olivia, in *Twelfth Night*, for all her vows of celibacy, will fall in love absurdly easily—and with another woman. The convent-minded Isabel in *Measure for Measure* will shock us by admitting that she values chastity more than her own brother's life. In each case Shakespeare brings the audience to a recognition of the folly or danger in the extreme position. Dougherty doesn't see

Digby's abstinence and isolationism as extreme, so he makes his hero's voice the only sane and sweet sound in a foolish world. But Digby's abstinence is a position of excess: from the point of view of moral comedy it has to be.

It doesn't matter whether Digby is right about "sex" and "intimacy" or not. Angelo in *Measure for Measure*—another "man of stricture and firm abstinence"—is in the right in thinking lechery too rife a vice in Vienna. It is also, as someone points out later, "impossible to extirp it quite . . . till eating and drinking be put down." Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*—another fellow who rails against the world to find "no wit, manners, nor honesty" in his contemporaries—is in the right when he comes out to tell the revelers that they are making too much noise. "Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?" Sir Toby asks belligerently, and the question reverberates down all the years. Being in the right does not make the Malcontent any less the Malcontent—that is what makes him such an interesting figure—because comedy is concerned with the moral condition of the individual, not that of society. So it doesn't really matter whether outside of the theater Digby Merton is right—about the New Morality, about the New York Yankees, about the avant-garde art scene and the permissive display windows in midtown. For the world that comedy creates inside a theater, his o'ermastering distress in the face of an uncouth modern world is a "humor": it distorts his perceptions of the world and limits and controls his actions.

Ironically, for all its moralistic fervor, Joseph Dougherty's play comes close to being an *immoral* comedy. For there is really only one "morality," one doctrine, that comedy subscribes to: the doctrine of free will. Comedy remains convinced that exclusive devotion to any *one* thing, whether base or noble, is a distortion of man's moral nature. For to confine oneself within a certain pattern of action or utterance out of a single, all-consuming interest—whether for money, learning, or spiritual grace—is to

pervert the state of moral freedom in which man was created. So comedy invents the "humor" character. His function in the first instance is to make us laugh, but ultimately the character of comic excess was born to be set free.

The point is not to rail against Joseph Dougherty for being a lesser playwright than Shakespeare, any more than it is to reproach Neil Simon for not knowing his Menander. What I am suggesting is that there is such a thing as *comic sensibility*—an attitude of mind or way of looking at the world that derives not from formal knowledge of history or development of the genre, but from an innate sense of what it is that comedy was put on earth to do. The comic sensibility instinctively mistrusts anything that seeks to set an arbitrary limit on human understanding or experience. It needs no special genius or erudition to assume that you cannot expect a man to make moral decisions in an imperfect and ambiguous world if he is only looking at a partial version of it. That is precisely what all those vows are doing there in Shakespeare: they are the concrete expression of an arbitrary limit set on action. For Joseph Dougherty to represent as independent-minded a character who is acting out the terms of a self-imposed vow goes against everything that comedy stands for and believes in, everything that Northrop Frye first defined as "the argument of comedy" in his two essays on the development of the genre, whose "moral norm" he pointed out, is "not morality, but deliverance from moral bondage." In terms of comedy's morality, Digby's abstinence is no more "moral" than Faye's random promiscuity because it has no greater foundation in reason. In truly comic terms, in fact, Digby's randy friend Harry is quite right: the trouble with Digby is that (like Angelo and Malvolio before him) he just does not know how to have a good time.

The audience at the Astor Place Theatre wasn't expecting much. "The play is nothing, but go and see it for the performance,"

was what people had to say about *The Foreigner*. For my part, I wasn't expecting anything at all: I hate farce. It enrages me. And yet, although the scene before me was pure farce, I felt curiously calm.

It was a dead cert that someone was going to walk into the room. Sitting by himself in the parlor of Betty Meeks's hunting and fishing lodge, Charlie—the little science-fiction copy editor who had just arrived that night from England—was trying to muster the courage to go in and tell his hostess that he actually spoke English quite well: “Froggy” had just been pulling her leg. Actually, Froggy's lie had been a generous one. Charlie simply couldn't cope with people right now, so Froggy had been trying to arrange things so that he wouldn't have to. He'd meant well, Froggy had; still, it had been a mad idea telling Betty that Charlie didn't speak any English. You couldn't pretend a thing like that. Not Charlie, anyway: he scarcely had it in him to be himself, let alone someone else.

That was the whole problem, really: this gap that Charlie seemed to have where other people had a personality. Froggy probably had no conception of what it was like to be as “shatteringly, profoundly boring” as Charlie was. “I've often wondered—how does one acquire personality,” Charlie had mused in just the tone of voice in which Socrates must have wondered whether virtue can be taught. And when he'd suddenly come over all lyrical and dreamy-eyed—

What must it be like, to be able to tell a funny story? To arouse laughter? Anger. Respect. To be thought—wise? How must it be?

—we'd smiled slowly to ourselves, in the sudden conviction that Charlie was fated to find out.

So it was a dead cert, really, that before Charlie had pulled himself together enough to rob Betty of her illusions about the exotic “foreigner” now sitting in the somewhat menacing decor of her guest lodge, someone would burst into the room and, failing to notice Charlie, launch into a conversation

so intimate, so embarrassing to listen to, that . . . well, the rest was history. *Before it had happened*, it was already history: that some farcical situation would trap Charlie in Froggy's lie and that, forced into pretending to be something he was not, the forlorn little copy editor would manage to become more than what he was.

I went to see *The Foreigner* at the insistence of a friend, but left to my own devices, I probably wouldn't have bothered. *The Foreigner* had not been well reviewed; in fact, in retrospect, some of the critics who were to write so tolerantly and affectionately of *Digby* and *Biloxi Blues* seem to have been strangely outraged by Larry Shue's innocuous little play. John Simon, in a review that set new records for gratuitous displays of erudition and ill temper, had seemed almost beside himself relentlessly describing every detail of the play's foolish plot, offering an *explication de texte* on the subject of why one of its feeble jokes didn't come off, and dismissing the play on the whole as “unintelligent trash,” while grudgingly allowing that its author might be “capable of writing intelligent trash for well-bred pigs to wallow in.” The *Times* review, though calmer, was equally contemptuous. Frank Rich had been at pains to express enthusiasm and respect for the performance of the leading actor, one Anthony Heald, but he sighed audibly over its “stereotypical” characters and seemed to blush for a plot that required “a full act to set up—with much of the exposition delivered by” a single character, wearily dismissing the play as a “labored” attempt at farce. Both reviews, in short, made *The Foreigner* sound tedious, stupid, and eminently crude.

Of course *The Foreigner* was rather crude—on a certain level. The whole premise of the play was absurd, for instance: two Englishmen arrive from out of nowhere in the middle of Georgia's heartland, one of them—“Froggy” LeSueur (played by the playwright himself), a jovial Cockney soldier and demolitions expert—just over for his annual weekend stint as a guest instructor to the U.S. Armed Forces; the other, Charlie (Mr. Heald), the friend he has con-

trived to bring along for a much needed rest cure and whom he plans to leave in the capable hands of his old and dear friend Betty Meeks. Who goes to Georgia for the weekend? Why did they have to be Englishmen? Where had someone like "Froggy" ever met someone like Betty? And why were there quotation marks around his name? One's head fairly buzzed with questions.

Then there had been the style of exposition: Froggy, having set the machinery in motion for a mistaken-identity plot, would disappear conveniently, but not before a series of staggeringly informative conversations had managed to establish: that Charlie's wife was dying (and was not very nice to him in any case); that Betty might have to sell the house if she couldn't find money enough to make repairs since the local property inspector, "mean" Owen Musser (who was a big noise in the Ku Klux Klan), was trying to have it condemned; that also staying at Betty's guest lodge was pretty young Catherine Simms, who had lots of money and, moreover, was lonely, bored, and irritable in spite of being engaged to a very nice preacher; that Catherine's "idiot" kid brother Ellard had been getting more befuddled of late, sometimes not remembering the things he'd done wrong, and that the very nice preacher seemed to have something to do with it. All of which added up (without too much hard reckoning) to a series of subplots and complots aimed at cheating various characters out of their homes and inheritances and setting Charlie on the road to romance.

One of the things that makes it so much easier to damn a play than praise one is the comparative grace with which one can make almost any play sound tedious, stupid, and crude by simply describing the plot in conscientious detail. Describe the plot of *Hamlet* or *Othello* and I'm rolling about on the floor, clutching my sides. What made the plot of *The Foreigner* seem particularly absurd and yet oddly acceptable was a style of exposition in which realistic motivation was so completely subordinated to dramatic necessity that it was actually funny. The plot

unfolding was contrived, certainly, but so was the dialogue setting it up, a dialogue full of lines that bore no relation to the way people actually think and speak.

CHARLIE: I should have stayed with Mary, at the hospital. When a man's wife is dying he belongs with her, not—not in Georgia.

FROGGY: We'll only be 'ere three days.

CHARLIE: Still—with only six months left. Six months. Before she—

FROGGY: Now, now. Doctors 've been wrong before. Besides which, Mary wanted yer to come 'ere with me, you know that. Fairly begged me to take yer, she did.

CHARLIE: Yes. And so I agreed. But—

This sort of dialogue is approaching parody: it makes no attempt to simulate the logic and cadence of real speech and, like all those exclamations of "But stay!" and "Alas!" in Gilbert and Sullivan, it has the effect of distancing the dialogue from realistic expectation.

Once, early in the opening scene, Froggy and Charlie were discussing Charlie's unhappy marriage. They were standing at the edge of the stage, facing out toward the audience. "Love her?" said Charlie, fixing his eyes on some point just beyond the exit door. He nodded. "More than anything on earth: Love is not love, Froggy, which alters when it alteration finds." Hat in hand, Froggy chewed on this a moment. "No," he agreed thoughtfully. There was a pause while Froggy found an adjacent spot above the audience's heads to stare at. "'Oo said that?" he asked quietly and Charlie, very sadly, answered, "Shakespeare."

FROGGY: Ah, yes. (*Pause*) 'E could turn a phrase, couldn't 'e?

CHARLIE: Yes . . .

FROGGY: (*Poetically*) "Love is not love, Froggy, which—" What?

CHARLIE: "Which—which alters when it alteration finds."

FROGGY: Yes. Quite true.

There was no reason for them to be standing side by side, talking out toward the audience. In fact, if you thought about it at all, the blocking was totally unnatural and absurd. People don't stand side by side to talk to one another unless they are gazing out a window or into an open hearth; and given the layout of the room before us—window over there, fireplace over there, room shaped so—they couldn't really have been staring at anything but a wall. They looked, in fact, like two actors performing in an amateurishly blocked play. It wasn't Camp, because the lines were all delivered perfectly deadpan—with (on the part of both Anthony Heald and Larry Shue) a good deal of that counterfeit obliviousness so useful for tempering irony with comic restraint. In fact, what made the inane and predictable dialogue so funny was that although the grave delivery of the silly lines did not even approach Camp—had nothing to do with irony at all—the staging did. So that when Charlie, very sadly and solemnly, came up with the correction we were all waiting for, pointing out that Shakespeare hadn't said "Froggy," and with equal sadness and solemnity his friend agreed, "No. No, 'e wouldn't, of course," you couldn't help laughing. It seemed to be asking so little of you.

Apparently not everyone thought so. The critics who took such a scunner to *The Foreigner* characterized it as unsuccessful farce, enumerating the areas in which it fell short. Implausibility was a key factor here. Frank Rich talked about the play's "preposterous" plot and John Simon, before going on to fault the credibility of its premise, offered the general observation that, "[w]hat makes good farce a valid art form is its keeping a firm grip on reality . . ." Actually, most farce is based on an implausible premise, a preposterous situation or pattern of behavior which the audience is willing to accept in the hope of being amused. We accept that it would never occur to the husband in the British sex farce to simply chuck the mysterious pornographic shipment away, just as—in order to gasp and giggle at the quick-

change gags in the Feydeau farce—we accept that the bellhop working in the sleazy hotel down the street just happens to be the hero's double. Reality doesn't even come into it. What makes Mr. Simon's views of "good" and "bad" farce somewhat academic is the fact that *The Foreigner* wasn't a farce at all. The mistaken-identity plot should have tipped him off.

Mistaken identity as a comic device tends to arise from one of two paradigmatic plots. In one, a character is taken for someone or something he is not because of an accident or trick of fate: the existence, say, of someone else who looks just like him. That's farce. In comedy, though, a character is taken from someone or something he is not because he has assumed a disguise. What replaces the *lusus naturae* of farce here is an element of conscious deception, the need for which often arises out of an already existing situation. Thus, whereas in farce, mistaken identity *creates* a comic situation, in comedy it generally resolves one. Moreover, the end of the mistaken-identity plot in farce is simply laughter. In *The Comedy of Errors*, for example, Antipholus of Syracuse is driven to question his sanity on his arrival in Ephesus because his identical twin brother, Antipholus of Ephesus, is known about town. The disguise plot of comedy, though, often becomes part of a process of transformation in which a character has to engage in some variety of action that has hitherto been alien to him. Thus, a Rosalind or a Viola will find that she has to "become" a man in order to get her man. It was this pattern that Larry Shue was following when he constructed around a character of manifestly limited experience and capabilities a situation that would call for him to become someone else.

The possible variations on the mistaken-identity plot are, of course, legion: in comedy, for instance, the character who assumes the disguise is not always the one who is transformed. Moreover, the lines between farce and comedy can become blurred. Morality, as Coleridge observed, lies at the heart of the distinction between

comedy and farce—with chance generating the plot of one and character the other, with farce, in general, confounding the identities of two “actual” characters and comedy inventing a “fictional” person who does not exist. But there are plots arising from both character and chance and the other generalization does not always hold true. The incidence of twinship in *The Comedy of Errors*, for example, is certainly a *lusus naturae* and it is indisputably a stroke of the most wonderful luck that brings Antipholus of Syracuse to Ephesus on the very same day as his father after five years of random and uncharted wandering. But it is character that motivates his search for the rest of his family in the first place, a quest which, in spite of the farcical nature of the mistaken-identity plot, is expressed throughout the play in the language of comic disguise. Mistaken identity becomes a loss of identity and subsequent discovery of self that occurs when Antipholus willingly submits to the idea of metamorphosis under the influence of the girl he has fallen for. “Transform me,” he says to the sister of his brother’s wife, “and to your power I’ll yield.”

Actually, the silly little play that brought two Englishmen to Georgia as implausibly as the ships that bring two Syracusans to the shores of Ephesus on the same day in *The Comedy of Errors* had a certain amount in common with Shakespeare’s earliest comedy. Like the Syracusan brother in *Errors*, the hero of *The Foreigner* is a character who, before he can find himself, must be prepared to lose himself. But *The Foreigner* is fundamentally a more moral comedy than *The Comedy of Errors*. For Shakespeare was less concerned with specifically who Antipholus turns out to be or what he should become than simply that he find an identity outside of himself: only in poetry does a transformation occur. By contrast, the precise nature of Charlie’s charade in *The Foreigner* is of far greater consequence—indeed, it is the whole point.

The Foreigner was a perfect little New Comedy plot in which a clever trickster (Froggy) used deception in order to set

everything to rights. You had your basic “humor” characters—the hypocrite preacher, the irritable fiancée, the misanthropic Ku Kluxer, the simpleton—as well as an obstructed romance between the hero and a heroine promised to some representative of a corrupt and petrified established order who is ultimately exposed as an impostor. *The Foreigner* rang a delightful Shakespearian change on this Plautine plot, however: for since Charlie’s flaw was his passivity, his inability to have any effect on other people, his utter redundancy—

I sometimes wonder whether a science-fiction magazine even needs a proofreader. Does anyone really care whether there is one K or two in “Klatu, barada, nikto?” No, no, I’m boring, all right . . .

—the plot required him to become a behind-the-scenes manipulator and to assume the role of trickster himself. Farce is about situations; comedy about processes and most of the pleasure one derived in the audience at the Astor Place Theatre came from watching Anthony Heald acquire a personality and undergo the transformation into a person who, by trickery, could provoke laughter, anger, respect—even tell a funny story in a made-up language so that when the primary trickster reappeared, late in the second act, Froggy found that he had been displaced and had to admit to feeling “quite borin’” himself.

Just what Mssrs. Simon and Rich found to be offensive in *The Foreigner* is not entirely clear to me. Perhaps they thought that Larry Shue was trying to “get away with” something. Some sort of oddly clear but very partial vision seems to have been at work, though; for in spite of the particular accuracy of their reviews—and, point by point, nearly everything that Rich and Simon said about the play was substantially true—their descriptions failed to tell the whole story. The play and its outcome were predictable, as Mr. Rich suggested, but not in a way that warranted the air of discovery with which he made the observation. *Digby* was predictable

because the playwright wasn't any smarter than the audience: you knew, for instance, that its uptight hero, who didn't smoke dope and had never slugged anyone, would wind up punching the wrong guy and acting silly on Demerol. But *The Foreigner* was predictable in the way that pianos and revolving doors are predictable. Each little bit of information established in the exposition predicated a solution alongside the problem it proposed. If it seemed heavy-handed, it was supposed to: that was what made it funny. *The Foreigner* wasn't trying to fool anyone. A playwright who, like Joseph Dougherty, has to give his hero a line like, "Thanks, Harry, I really don't need a recap of my life," is probably trying to cover up for clumsy exposition. But a playwright who gives his hero a line like, "When a man's wife is dying, he belongs with her . . . not in Georgia," is making fun of the whole idea of exposition, inviting the audience to join in laughing at itself. "But we don't know 'The Fable of the Magnet and the Churn,'" says one of Gilbert's love-sick maidens in *Patience*. "Don't you," says the poet. "I'll sing it for you." Presumably no one would reproach Gilbert for a heavy-handed song cue! Precisely what was clever about *The Foreigner* was the pseudo-farcical, Gilbertian style of dialogue and exposition that carved out a zany, half-ironic place between parody and realistic theater where the implausible could become plausible or not offend. For all disguise plots, like all mistaken-identity plots, are fundamentally implausible—the most implausible being that which relies on the proposition that a man could spend the night with a woman without knowing who the hell she is. You can't get much more implausible than that!

Plausibility is not the instrument by which to gauge successful farce or comedy. Still, buried somewhere in the rhetoric of Mr. Simon's definition of "good" farce may lie the germ of a truth more relative than the one he is looking for, one that explains something, if not about the mechanics of farce, at least about the presence of the

Malcontent in the audience of farce. There is, for instance, no production of *The Comedy of Errors* that could hope to amuse or entertain me: I cannot take an interest in a character who arrives on foreign soil in search of his identical twin brother and cannot figure out why strangers seem to think they recognize him. And nothing in the play sufficiently appeals to my imagination to make me want to forget this implausibility. *The Foreigner*, on the other hand, was full of things that appealed to my imagination. It may be that some such *imaginative* aesthetic was at work when Mssrs. Simon and Rich sat down to review Larry Shue's play. In any event, their negative votes became, ironically, a positive part of the experience of attending the play—almost a mechanism in the final resolution.

For the feeling in the audience at the Astor Place Theatre was something akin to euphoria as the actors came out to take their final bows. Charlie had got his girl and Betty her house, Ellard had found his self-esteem; the hypocrite had been exposed, that nasty man who wanted everyone to be the same was gone for good, and Froggy had blown up a permanent part of the landscape. Moreover, we had all laughed ourselves silly—and at what? At jokes that one would refuse to acknowledge or cock a pitying eyebrow at outside of a theater. But because the play had received such bad reviews and stayed open anyway, because each person there had probably (like me) been sent to see the play by someone else, and particularly because the author was right there onstage—"Froggy," the trickster, looking a little bit more mischievously triumphant with each curtain call—the noise and the laughter and the clapping and the silly mountain music began to seem like a celebration in whose festivities the audience had chosen to take part.

You told yourself it was all part of theater, this hysteria, this oppressive feeling of goodwill. Good heavens! They went through this every night. Still, you couldn't help smiling in the end; and little by little, it started feeling like a dance.

The eternal note of Salvatore Quasimodo

by James Gardner

Even the Italians seem to feel that the bestowal upon Quasimodo of the 1959 Nobel Prize for Literature was vastly in excess of his artistic attainments. For not only was it disputed that he possessed that Olympian stature implicit in the conferring of this last dignity upon a living author, it was also unclear why he should have been preferred before his two fellow Hermeticists Eugenio Montale and Giuseppe Ungaretti, or a dozen other Italian poets who were felt to be not only more melodious and more profound, but also much more easily understood. One solution to this mystery, which in its way is as peculiar and intractable as many of his poems, might be Quasimodo's role in the Resistance, which would have cleared him of any taint of fascism, and then his sympathies with the Left, which in poets is always construed as a positive virtue.

But one is tempted to propose that the answer might be found in the ineffaceable fact that Quasimodo simply *seems* like a Nobel Laureate, and sounds like one, and even looks like one. There are two kinds of Nobel prize-winners in literature—those who honor that institution, and those who are honored by it. In the first category are Mann, Gide, and Eliot, whose glory and desserts are already greater than any earthly institution is likely to do justice to, and whom it is possible to consider without there intruding at every moment the awesome consciousness of this supreme dignity that has been conferred upon them. And in

the second category, since no century can reasonably be asked to generate as many geniuses as the Academy presumes to recognize, there is that vast and varied amalgam of less exalted luminaries, some very good, some quite bad, who are more apt to be read for having won the Nobel Prize, than for any merit that might have warranted it. And Quasimodo seems hand-picked for this honor because he gives offense to no one, he advocates nice things like peace, socialism, and children, and his poetic distinction is not so obtrusive as to eclipse the Academy's generosity. Furthermore, since poets, unlike novelists, tend not to have been tainted by anything as corrosive as wide-spread appeal, it was thus possible to usher him from his virginal obscurity into the arms of an adoring world.

But perhaps the best reason is that he seems tailor-made to fit the platitude that the Swedish Academy used to describe him, when it claimed that "with classical fire he expresses the tragic experience of life in our time," which I found, predictably, on the back cover of the present volume.¹ The triteness of this will be apparent, instinct as it is with the well-worn cadences of the postwar period, when, in an unavailing but by no means laughable way, men's minds were struggling to understand what was still so

1 *Complete Poems* by Salvatore Quasimodo; introduced and translated by Jack Bevan; Schocken, 247 pages, \$8.95 (paper).

present to their memories. The specific perversity of that phrase, however, which persists a generation later in commencement exercises, congressional elections, and bar mitzvahs, resides in its efforts to "sound the eternal note," without realizing just how dated that eternity has become. And Quasimodo's poetry exhibits everywhere the same cadences of that "eternal note," the implicit assumption of any individual's superiority to any institution, the gracefully expressed and spontaneous conviction that the poor and the oppressed, as subjects of poems, must always yield something of interest to the rest of us, and those bland and unchallengeable truisms which are supposedly the truer for being the blander.

It is remarkable that this tone survives almost entirely unchanged in the 173 poems in eight volumes that constitute the fruits of fifty years of writing poetry. But this eternal note is almost at all times allied to a most tenacious obscurity. For Quasimodo was the third man in the Hermeticist Movement, which had been initiated by Ungaretti and propagated by Montale, and which was the dominant poetic force in Italy in the first half of the century. As the name would imply, it is the sort of poetry that will yield its meaning only after its nut has been cracked. Its origins are in French Symbolists like Mallarmé and Valéry, whom these Italians read very closely, and from whom they seem to have derived the crucial conviction that poems ought to convey their meanings only to the most assiduous and committed readers. But while the difficulties in Symbolist poetry were the result of the desire nebulously to allude to highly subjective states, which they themselves made no effort to grasp exactly, the Hermeticists are never so much obscure as recondite. Their meaning becomes clearer not so much through the dispersal of mists as through the discovery of the key that will reveal precisely in what relation all the poem's parts stand to each other. This component of their theory the Hermeticists seem to have taken from Eliot's famous "objective correlative," which sought to purge poetry of that languorous

Pre-Raphaelite indeterminacy in which he had found it in the early years of this century, by communicating an inner state through reference to some external object in the shared experience of the poet and his reader. But while Montale is almost always the master of the crisp and accurate implementation of his symbols, which persuades us that he is always saying something, even when he has defeated our best efforts at explication, in the case of Quasimodo one has almost always the nagging suspicion that his images, sloshing around in vagueness, may mean rather less than their portentous understatement would imply. In his introduction to this volume, the translator, Jack Bevan, rather inauspiciously advises us to "surrender to the poems on their own terms," in other words, to be satisfied with only a partial understanding, as perhaps he has resolved to do. And I freely admit, and in this I have the corroboration of Pier Paolo Pasolini and Giuseppe De Robertis, that more often than not, I was annoyed by the obscurity of these poems, which seemed simultaneously to mean anything, its opposite, and all points in between.

With some hesitancy, then, I resolved to follow the translator's directive by surrendering to the poems on their own terms, and here I fared a little better. For finally, after reading the Italian,² I came to feel that there was something to this poetry, something better than if it merely hadn't been, better than the silence from which it emerged, which is more than can be said of all but a small percentage of the world's poets. I felt that I could locate two primary virtues in these poems, or more precisely in this poetry, since these virtues occur often throughout his career, without being consistently present in any one poem. For Quasimodo, despite his vagueness and obscurity, and the tameness with which he conforms to the stereotype of the Nobel Laureate, is after all a highly sensitive and intelligent man. And in certain moments, alas too rare, he achieves a moral and poetic stature which, if it were in

2 In *Giorno dopo Giorno*. Mondadori: 1947.

evidence only once, would nevertheless alert us to the fact that we are in the presence of a true poet. Even in the nine years that remained to him after receiving the Nobel Prize, Quasimodo's politics and his morals, however elusively stated, can never be reduced to a simple slogan or dogma, and his poems always bear the impress of an active intelligence grappling in an imaginative if not entirely lucid way with the reality of the world around him. And even when he is brought into conformity with some of the more pallid orthodoxies of the postwar period, his conviction is obdurate and inscrutable, and he remains eminently to be reckoned with. Indeed there pervades these works a sobriety which is sometimes relieved by lyricism but never by levity. These poems tend to be quite short, ending punctually around the twentieth line, and the tone is characterized by an unyielding leanness by which the poet takes up as little of the reader's time as he does of his own.

If this moral irreducibility is one of Quasimodo's virtues, another consists in those patches of poetry which, in purely formal terms, even out of context, do not fail to produce an impressive effect, as in:

O cara, quanto
tempo è sceso con le foglie dei pioppi,
quanto sangue nei fiumi della terra.

(O love, how
much time has dropped with the poplar leaves,
how much blood into the rivers of the earth.)

or

Già
m'eri vicina tu con quella voce;
ed io vorrei che pure a te venisse,
ora, di me un'eco di memoria
come quel buio murmure di mare.

(Once
you, with that voice, were near me;
and I wish now there could come to you
also an echo of me,
like that dark ocean murmur.)

This poetry seems to me to be indisputably beautiful, and in its rich cadences and in the propriety of the language and the meter, it might almost be mistaken for Leopardi, who was writing one and a quarter centuries earlier. And Quasimodo is always at his best when he is most securely rooted in the hendecasyllable, the staple meter of Italian verse. This is something which the translations by Jack Bevan make no effort to communicate. The problem with them is not that they are inaccurate or unmusical, so much as that they are merely different from the original, and though the English reader may peruse them with pleasure, I doubt they will engender in his mind precisely those sentiments that are found in the Italian. Mr. Bevan seems to place full faith in the fact that Quasimodo is modern, without ever appreciating his rootedness in earlier linguistic convention. Though the hendecasyllable is not as pervasive or as faithfully maintained in Quasimodo and his contemporaries as it was with the poets of earlier centuries, still, through the metrical experiments of poets like Aldo Palazzeschi and Ungaretti, it had been fortified against the flaccidity into which it had fallen in the final years of the nineteenth century, and thus Quasimodo was able now to return to it in a reinvigorated form. In the same way, incidentally, after Pound disowned iambic pentameter, Eliot was free to use it however he wished without feeling any longer the debilitating influence of the Pre-Raphaelites. But in this regard subsequent poets chose to follow in the footsteps of Pound's revolution rather than Eliot's reformation.

Another difficulty in Mr. Bevan's translations is their dry-eyed "objectivism," which appears to derive, even if indirectly, from William Carlos Williams, and attempts coldly and crisply to "photograph" each object through the simple assertion of its corresponding word. The mood or mode of Quasimodo's poetry, however, is from beginning to end quite different. On the one hand, everything he says is apt to be conditioned by the concessions he must make to the formal demands of the hendecasyllable,

with its eleven syllables and proneness toward iambs, and on the other he is writing in a rich mediterranean language, whose mellifluousness and vocality, as well as the felt physical presence of the speaker, impose themselves on everything that is said. That Mr. Bevan makes little or no effort to convey this, he himself as much as admits in his introduction, when he says that "Quasimodo's poetry lies beyond the constrictions of a particular language. He is less susceptible to the ills of translation than some other poets." But despite the evasive vagueness of "some other poets," this is surely not true, and I doubt whether it is the sort of thing any poet would especially wish to have said about his work. Quasimodo's poetry is not written *in* Italian, it *is* Italian. But it is true that his subject matter can generally be conveyed with success, and in these translations, the English reader will be able to appreciate at least the thematic elements in the poetry of Quasimodo.

Empson the moralist

William Empson Using Biography.
Harvard University Press,
259 pages, \$17.50

reviewed by René Wellek

Before William Empson died on April 15, 1984, he prepared a volume of essays he called *Using Biography*. It has since appeared in England and now in this country. Empson had not published a single book since *Milton's God* (1961), which was something of a *succès de scandale*. (God in *Paradise Lost*, he told us, is "astonishingly like Uncle Joe Stalin" and the poem is "horrible and wonderful: I regard it like Aztec or Benin sculpture or the novels of Kafka.") One knew that Empson had published many articles since then, but they were scattered over English and American periodicals and it was difficult to form a clear picture of his work of the last twenty years. Thus a collection of essays of his own choice is most welcome.

Using Biography is ostensibly held together by Empson's attention to the use of biography in criticism and by his aim of refuting "the Wimsatt Law . . . which says that no reader can ever grasp the intention of an author." But this formulation of the "intentional fallacy" completely misrepresents its meaning. W. K. Wimsatt did not forbid the use of biography and history in the study of literature; he used them both all the time himself. The intentional fallacy means something perfectly sensible and defensible: that the mere declared intention of an author is no valid criterion for judging a work of art. The many misstatements writers have made about their intentions prove the point. This was recognized long before the New Criticism: the Schlegels, the Russian radical critic Dobrolyubov, the great Italian theorists and historians Francesco De Sanctis and Benedetto Croce stated it forcibly. D. H. Lawrence put it in a nutshell: "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale."

Empson uses his rejection of the imaginary "Wimsatt's Law" to defend his excursions into the biography of Andrew Marvell and his speculations about a hypothetical continuation of Joyce's *Ulysses*. In "The Marriage of Marvell," as far as I can ascertain the only piece in the book never printed before, he argues that Marvell actually did marry his housekeeper, who signed herself "Mary Marvell" in the preface to *Miscellaneous Poems* (1681). The claim of the housekeeper—that she was Marvell's widow and entitled to an annuity—was disputed at the time in a long, drawn-out lawsuit of which the final outcome is not known. But two eighteenth-century biographical memoirs, 1726 and 1776, dismiss it; and in 1938 Professor Fred S. Tupper, in an article in *PMLA*, unearthed documents, "depositions" from the Public Record Office, which seemed to substantiate the rejection of her claim. Empson delved into the matter, got hold of copies of the documents, and in his essay refuted Tupper to his satisfaction, disentangling the family quarrels over money matters and showing the likelihood that the pair was married clandestinely at the Church

of the Little Minories, a "liberty" near the Tower of London. But since the records are lost, no conclusive evidence can be produced. Empson's effort seems disproportionate: the marriage bears no relation to Marvell's poetry.

The essay on Marvell's marriage is preceded by an essay called "Natural Magic and Populism in Marvell's Poetry" (1979), which defends the character of Marvell as citizen and politician. With Empson's usual assurance, he picks out individual lines from anonymous satires, identifying them as Marvell's own, and argues in favor of his old readings of Marvell's "The Garden" and "Upon Appleton House," wittily disputing Pierre Legouis, the French author of the modern standard biography of Marvell.

The paper meant to be the climax of the book, "The Ultimate Novel," on Joyce's *Ulysses*, dates from 1982 and seems to be Empson's last piece of writing. It is preceded by an older essay, "*Ulysses*: Joyce's Intentions" (1970). This penultimate essay attacks Hugh Kenner's book, *Dublin's Joyce* (1955) and the "Kenner smear," which, according to Empson, makes Joyce sound "as a terrific nag and scold," a man devoted to God who jeers at "the hopeless fatuity" of the thoughts of Bloom and Stephen Dedalus. Empson shows, convincingly to my mind, that Stephen at the end of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* has to be taken seriously when he voices his ambition "to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race." To buttress the view that Joyce, together with his hero, Stephen, hoped to be another Liberator of Ireland, Empson adduces the sword *Nothung* from Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* and Bernard Shaw's socialist readings of Ibsen and Wagner. He comments that "to maintain that the author intended to jeer at the whole sequence, and dropped hints so that the reader would join him in this activity, seems to me to betray a degree of mean-mindedness positively incapacitating for a literary critic." Drawing on details from Richard Ellmann's biography, Empson argues that Joyce never made his peace with Christian-

ity. It is "more sensible to blame him for an obsessive hatred of the religion." He complains that "for a majority of Eng. Lit. critics, especially in America, it seems to have become a convention to pretend that one has never heard of the opinions of the Enlightenment." In 1953, when Empson came back from China (where he had taught for a number of years), he was shocked to discover that the "Christianizers," as he called them, were in the saddle in the universities. This article is part of his campaign against their interpretations.

"The Ultimate Novel" propounds a theory about the continuation of *Ulysses*—what happens to the characters after the book ends. Empson considers this hypothetical ending the key to what the book is all about. "The end [of *Ulysses*] is a great question-mark, and if you are not interested in the answer you have no real interest in the book," he states bluntly. Empson argues with passion and ingenuity that Bloom offers to Stephen his wife Molly and that he then hopes, stimulated by watching the two copulate, to beget a son on Molly who would replace the lamented dead boy Rudy, thus fulfilling Bloom's ambition to perpetuate the male line. Joyce, Empson argues, thought at that time that "the happy triangle [was] a noble ideal." Apart from the difficulty of proving that this situation was in Joyce's mind, Empson's extrapolation about a continuation of the bare plot trivializes the book, reducing it to a story of a *ménage à trois*. It is like looking for the continuation of picture under the frame. We know from the text that Bloom and Stephen part, and if there are hints about their meeting again and establishing the household projected by Empson, *Ulysses* breaks off, after all, at the point of the parting of the two. Joyce never returned to the story. Even a clearly outlined continuation would only confirm the "intentional fallacy." Empson argues the way he does because he identifies the action of the novel with Joyce's experiences, complaining "at present there is a thick fog blanketing all such questions, a general movement among American critics towards formalism or un-

realism . . . [Wimsatt's] Law is a powerful means of destroying all literary appreciation." He is right in saying that Joyce is always present in the book, "rather oppressively so, like a judge in court," but this cannot mean that Joyce stopped his fictional narrative short because it happened that in real life the "Bloom Offer" (i.e., Bloom offering the favors of Molly to Stephen) was "never actually made." Empson states that "it would have been, or something very like it, but a miracle happened instead. [Joyce] saw Nora passing in the street—otherwise he would have lost his real self." But Nora Barnacle, with whom Joyce lived for years, cannot be simply identified with Molly (she herself said, "Molly is much fatter"). Moreover, Nora was seen by Joyce on June 10, 1904, four days before Bloomsday, and *Ulysses* was composed some fifteen to eighteen years later. Whatever the amount of realistic detail in *Ulysses*—the names, the streets, the pubs, the buildings, the tower, the beach, etc.—the book is fiction. This does not mean that it should be reduced simply to a language game, as some recent theorists try; rather it should be seen as the creation of a second world which is analogous to our own and refers to it, but which is not simply identical with it. Joyce said himself about his book: "I've put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors arguing for centuries over what I meant." We will have to do this, reading such a dense, allusive, and complex book, but we must refuse to reduce its meaning to an unwritten story of a marital triangle.

The other essays in Empson's book use biography far less. A review of Valerie Eliot's facsimile edition of the manuscript of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1972) approves of Pound's deletions and comments on the suppressed Dickensian sketches. Empson has nothing to say about the biographical background of the poem except to play up the Eliot family's disapproval of his move to England and his marriage. Eliot's father, in his last will, excluded Vivienne, Eliot's first wife, from inheriting any property left to his

son; and Eliot's mother, on her visit to London in the summer of 1921, refused to sleep under the same roof with her. But what this strained relationship has to do with the poem remains unclear, except that Eliot "had a grouse about his father." One would think that Eliot's anti-Semitism, which Empson discusses as derived from his father's Unitarianism, would rather speak for an identification. Empson makes far too much of Eliot's then conventional snobbery.

In "The Variants for the Byzantium Poems," Empson argues at length that the variants, or rather early drafts, of W. B. Yeats's two poems, "Byzantium" and "Sailing to Byzantium," support his interpretation of them as a "science fiction Long-Short." According to Empson the mysterious mummy in the poem directs the poet not to God, as some commentators have argued, but to the Emperor of Byzance: not in a paradise, but in a holy city. Empson, however, admits that "the symbolist method prevents one from interpreting the poem fully as a science fiction narrative." An old discussion of both "Byzantium" and "Sailing to Byzantium" in Cleanth Brooks's *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (1939) illuminates them better than Empson's essay, since Brooks sets the poems persuasively within the occult system of Yeats's *A Vision*.

In his long paper on Dryden, "A Deist Tract," Empson argues that a tract written between 1675 and 1678—and first printed in a collection called *The Oracles of Reason* (1693), edited by one of the early deists—was actually written by Dryden. Empson has no absolute proof, but he feels sure enough to attack Philip Harth, the author of *Contexts of Dryden's Thought* (1968), who doubts Dryden's authorship. The whole question is involved in theological controversies of little interest to modern ears. Empson has trouble accounting for Dryden's conversion to Roman Catholicism and even more for his remaining a Catholic after the accession of the Protestant William of Orange in 1688. For twelve years, up to the time of his death, Dryden endured fines and disabilities because of his Catholicism. Empson thinks it

all due to the influence of his Roman Catholic wife. I am always surprised how critics and historians can be so sure of the motivations of people, particularly of an earlier time, who have left no clear declarations or intimate confessions.

The best paper of the collection seems to me the discussion of Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1958). This essay does not use biography at all. Empson argues that Fielding, in this novel, expounds a "theory about ethics" which was "humanist, materialist, recommending happiness on earth," but which did not conflict with Christianity. Tom Jones's love affairs are condoned because they are no mere indulgences in the sexual appetite, but are motivated by a "mutuality of impulse," by benevolence and affection. Tom Jones never makes love to a woman unless she makes love to him first. Empson buttresses this sensible conclusion with an elaborate theory of "double irony." "Single irony presumes a censor; the ironist (A) is fooling a tyrant (B) while appealing to the judgement of a person addressed (C). For double irony A shows both B and C that he understands both their positions." Empson says that Fielding has "imaginative sympathy for both codes at once," a statement which allows him to reassert his old favorite, ambiguity, and even relativism. "It strikes me that modern critics, whether as a result of the neo-Christian movement or not, have become oddly resistant to admitting that there is more than one code of morals in the world, whereas the central purpose of reading imaginative literature is to accustom yourself to this basic fact." Empson reflects well about Fielding's shifting concepts of honor, incest, prudence, and benevolence, but underrates what C. J. Rawson has called Fielding's "emphatic explicitness" and overstates his evasive irony. Rawson argues convincingly that Fielding is restating a moral philosophy, then widespread, that was aimed against the Hobbesian doctrine of egotism. Rawson calls it "benevolent hedonism," wherein self-love and social love are conceived as one. The theory of double irony is unnecessary, but should not obscure Emp-

son's genuine grasp of Fielding's moral attitudes and doctrines.

The title of this collection is, thus, something of a misnomer. We get biography in the Marvell essays and elsewhere, but little about its use for critical purposes. But then titles of books of miscellaneous essays are always a problem. Fancy metaphorical titles such as *The Charted Mirror*, *The Sovereign Flower*, *The Widening Gyre* tell us nothing about the content. Today it is apparently impossible to sell a book honestly called "Collected Essays," as Empson's should have been called. If it had been a collection of his later essays, it should have included the fine articles on Ben Jonson's *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, some of the essays and reviews attacking the Christianizers, a few theoretical pieces, such as "Rhythm and Imagery in English Poetry" (in the *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 1962), a splendid attack on the superstition of Imagism, and an amusing little piece called "Argufying in Poetry" (*The Listener*, August 22, 1963). But quite a few of Empson's later writings can be left in their magazine tombs undisturbed; for example, his speculations about "The Ancient Mariner" (*Critical Quarterly* 1964, expanded in *Introduction to Coleridge's Verse: A Selection*, 1972), an almost grotesque example of Empson's habitual confusion between fiction and reality. We are told that "the albatross is shot for food, a soup is made and drunk, and later only the externals of the albatross were hung around the Mariner's neck." The Polar Spirit has then, supposedly, some excuse for killing the whole crew, although Empson does not believe that there were two hundred men on the ship, as the poet tells us. The Spectre ship is actually a slave ship, he argues, merely because it is called "plankless." Why is the Nature Spirit called a "seraph?" Empson asks. He looks up "seraph" in the concordance to Coleridge's poems and finds that in an early poem the bride of the Prince Regent, imagining him before she met him, "had shaped a seraph and named it Love." Empson comments: "Come now, if Prinny could be a seraph, surely a nature-spirit could be. That settles

the matter." The donnish jocularity and learned pedantry obscures here and elsewhere the genuine insights of a critic who is fundamentally very rational and even rationalistic, believing that "poetry shares the fundamental logic with prose discourse." Empson strangely fails to understand the dreamworld of a supernatural ballad.

Looking back at the total work of Empson, we should acknowledge the great stimulus and charm of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930). In spite of some fanciful and farfetched associations, it has enormously increased our understanding of complex, mainly Metaphysical, poetry. The idea of the fluidity of language has, however, been pushed farther than Empson ever took it; it has helped to bring about the now fashionable theories of the "deconstructionists," who see nothing but "undecidables" in poetry and literature. We have arrived finally at a complete skepticism about language, and hence at the destruction of scholarship and rational enquiry. Empson wanted to increase our enjoyment of poetry, in its multiplicity and density, and could not have accepted the view that literature is just a meaningless language game, unrelated to history and even ordinary reality. The genre concept of Empson's second book, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), is an ingenious device to marshal texts into a continuity of history, basically Eliotic in its assumptions in spite of its over-

lay of Marxist and Freudian terminology. With *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951), Empson broke away from the emotionalism of the doctrines of his teacher, I. A. Richards, and turned to a rationalistic and utilitarian view of language which allowed him to discuss new texts, dramas, epics, and novels in terms of plots and ideas that would have been excluded from his earlier preoccupations with single words and diction. Empson arrived at a view of literature which made its discourse indistinguishable from that of other kinds of communications and literary criticism indistinguishable from any discussion of motives and morals. Empson's philosophy seems nearest to the ordinary language philosophy that came in the wake of the early Wittgenstein and not, as has been claimed, to Husserlian phenomenology. He remains primarily a practical critic unsurpassed as an often willful and eccentric reader of poetry. In his later writings, he is a shrewd commentator on plots, situations, attitudes, and doctrines. He rarely discusses a work of art as a whole or judges it with some aesthetic value in mind. In his later years he became a very secular moralist. I would not agree with Frank Kermode, quoted on the blurb of *Using Biography*, that Empson is "the chief English literary critic of the century," but I would gladly endorse his comment that these essays document a "crabbed critical genius."

Editor's note: Readers are reminded that no regular issues of *The New Criterion* are published during July or August. This year, a special summer supplement will be mailed to subscribers on July 15 and will be available at newsstands. (For information, see page seventy-one in this issue.) The next regular issue of *The New Criterion* will appear in September.

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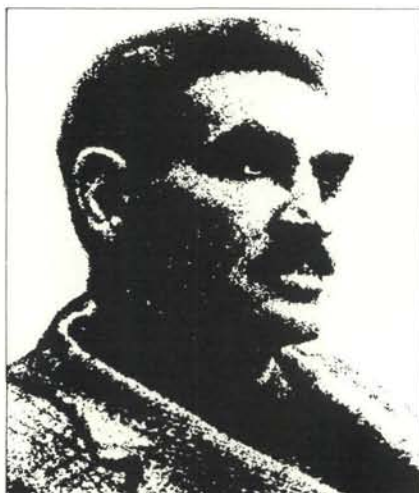
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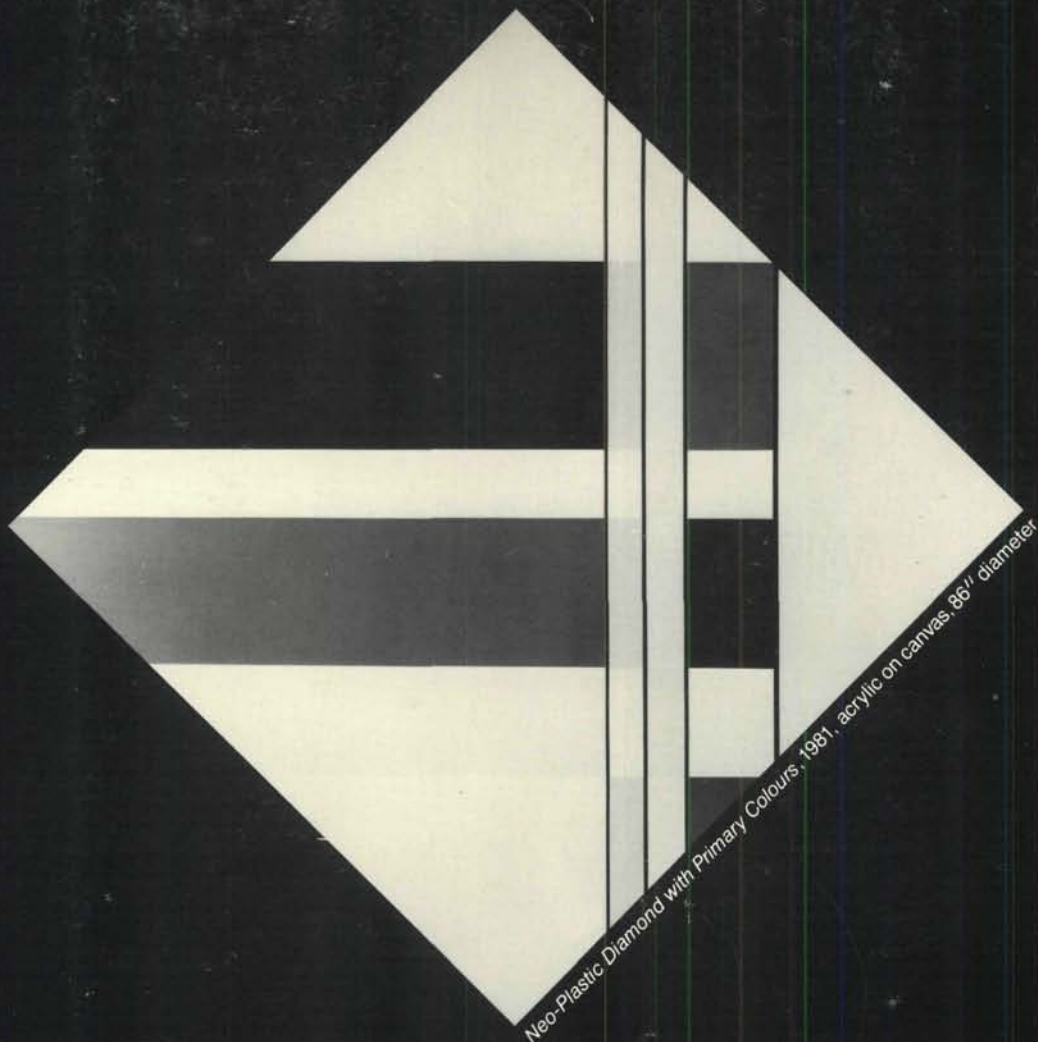
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